
Malaysia Cultural Insights Report

January – June 2021

An abstract graphic in the bottom right corner consisting of a thick white line forming a large, rounded 'M' shape, and a thick teal line forming a smaller, rounded 'M' shape nested within the white one. There is also a teal diamond shape in the top right corner.



Malaysia Cultural Insights Report

tom fleming / creative consultancy

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With thanks to William-Harald Wong (Design and the Wider Creative Industries), Amir Muhammad (Film, TV, Audiovisual) and Azmyl Yunor (Contemporary Music) for comments and input.

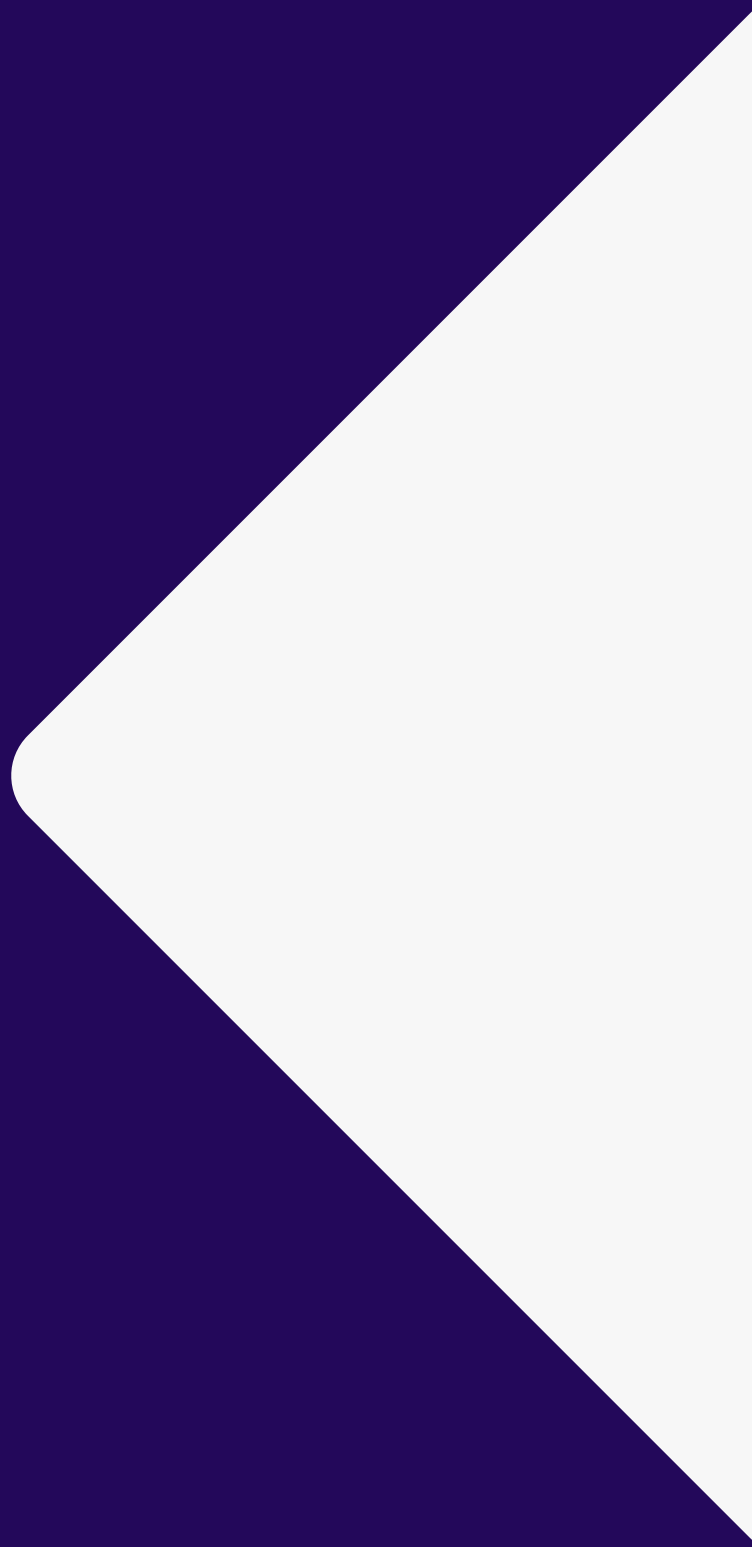
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Chapter 1: Executive Summary



1 Purpose of Document

This Malaysia Cultural Insights report is commissioned by The British Council Malaysia. It is researched and written by the Tom Fleming Creative Consultancy¹ with additional research by Dr Ann Lee. The document is intended to provide insightful information about the Malaysian cultural sector and wider creative industries. It is not a directory or comprehensive mapping document. Rather, it provides introductory information which we hope will be both informative and inspiring for UK artists and cultural organisations interested in collaborating, touring, or simply exchanging with this diverse and fast-changing country.

Overall, the document:

- Provides key context information to facilitate cultural collaboration and exchange between the UK and Malaysia
- Gives insights into key parts of the cultural sector – reflecting Malaysia's distinctive mosaic, its regional and ethnic diversity, and its qualities across different art forms
- Provides practical information regarding key institutions, emergent trends and talent and ways to access and engage with the sector. This includes some reflections on the impact of Covid-19.

The document is arranged into Chapters, with detailed insights on the profile, dynamics, structure and scene for:

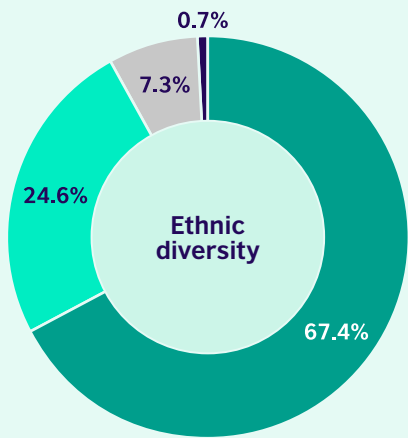
- Design and the wider creative industries
- Literature
- Film, TV, audiovisual
- Contemporary music
- Visual arts and crafts
- Performing arts

Each chapter provides an overview of the sector, inclusive of key organisations, practitioners and trends. Where possible, the policy and investment context are also featured. Throughout each chapter, we hint at or specify where there may be opportunities for the UK or other international partners in terms of collaboration, exchange, and trade. But overall, the chapters offer insights which we hope will spark readers' interest to reach out and connect with Malaysia's opportunities across the arts and creative industries.

¹ TFCC is a leading global authority on culture and the creative economy. This includes a portfolio of research and policy activities in Malaysia and the wider region: www.tfconsultancy.co.uk.

Malaysia Headline Facts

(UN data country profile; Department of Statistics Malaysia)



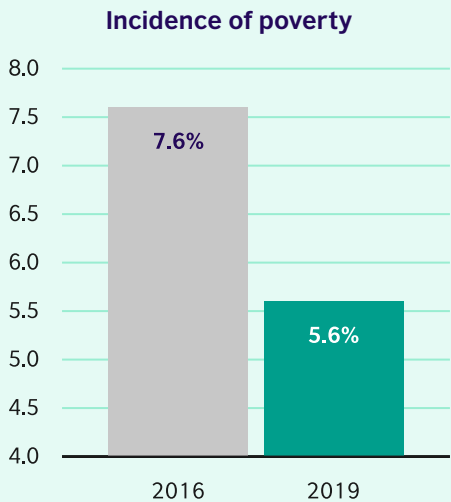
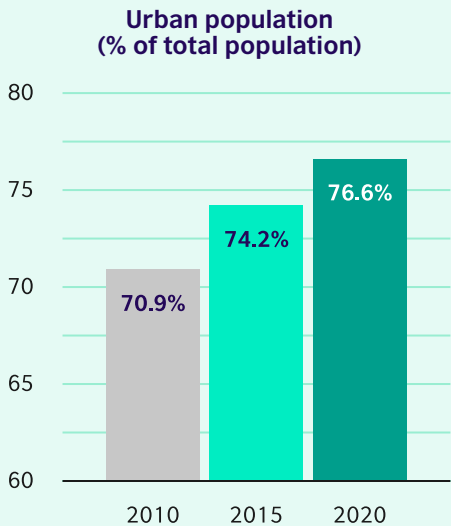
- Bumiputera
- Chinese
- Indians
- Others

Land Area
330,252 km²

Population
32.7 million

GDP per capita
US\$11,373.3

Language
**Malay (or Bahasa Malaysia);
English is widely spoken.
Over 140 languages spoken.**



2 Malaysia – A Diverse, Engaging Cultural and Creative Prospectus

Malaysia has it all: diverse traditions, sophisticated cities, inspiring regions, and a growing cultural and creative movement.

Located in Southeast Asia, Malaysia is a federal constitutional monarchy which shares a border with Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei and Thailand. The country consists of two main regions, conventionally referred to as Peninsular Malaysia (West Malaysia or formerly Malaya) and East Malaysia (Sabah, Sarawak and Labuan on Malaysian Borneo).

Malaysia has positioned itself as the springboard for or gateway to Southeast Asia - a hub for finance, trade and culture and prominent member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).² Its diverse culture, with a multilingual mix of predominantly Malay, Chinese, and Indian dialects, among others, including English; and a pioneering digitally-driven creative industries sector; contribute to a country which is fast-changing and variously attractive in terms of investment, tourism and talent.

The Covid-19 pandemic has, as with many other countries, been an enormous disruptor of the cultural and creative economy of Malaysia. It has exposed structural weaknesses and inequalities and forced policymakers and funders to both rescue cultural organisations and practitioners and reframe the strategic approach to sector development. There is much work to be done as Malaysia emerges as a strong and dynamic hub for cultural practice and as a dynamic creative cluster.

But Covid-19 has also been an accelerator of pre-existing trends – such as the role of digital in cultural production and consumption, the importance of creative networks and hubs for exchange and innovation, and the vital link between heritage and modernity as a key asset base for the Malaysian creative economy. With the right mix of support and investment, the Malaysian cultural and creative industries can grow again and play a starring role in the regional creative economy. In doing so, they will offer a prospectus of opportunities for UK and international collaboration and exchange.

This short chapter provides an initial context overview for Malaysia as a prelude to the chapters which each focus on a different art form/creative sector. Whether a creative enterprise looking for trade and collaboration; an artist seeking inspiration and exchange; or a cultural organisation committed to opening-up the boundaries of cultural relations and connecting agendas in art, culture, environment, and society; Malaysia has it all. This Insights Report gives a glimpse of what is possible.

² <https://www.pwc.com/my/en/assets/publications/2020/PwC-Doing-Business-Guide-2020.pdf>

Malaysia is diversity. A Mosaic. But diversity is also political and not every community has equal access to resources or a platform.

Polyethnic Cultural Make-up

Malaysia, a member of the Commonwealth, represents the political marriage of territories that were formerly under British rule.³ English is one of the most widely spoken languages and a lingua-franca in business. There are around 140 languages spoken in Malaysia (Peninsular Malaysia 40, Sabah 54, Sarawak 46). Malaysia also has a large and vibrant diaspora community in Singapore, Australia, India and the UK.

The national cultural policy places Malay, orang asli and native groups from Sabah and Sarawak ('bumiputera' or indigenous cultures) as primary, and Bahasa Malaysia/Melayu (or Malay) as the national language (while others are 'vernacular').

The majority Muslim ethnic Malay are dominant politically and the government is the most influential player in most key economic sectors. A large ethnic Chinese minority holds substantial economic power.

Polyethnic and multilingual, the imagery of a 'mosaic' has been coined by academics and practitioners to denote the celebrated multicultural diversity.

It would be incorrect to refer to 'Malay' and 'Malaysian' as exclusively interchangeable. 'Malaysian' includes a wide web of cultures, defined by ethnicity. There are 13 states in Malaysia which is a guide to the diversity of 'regionalism'.

In addition to Malay (comprising at least 15 million speakers in the population of 32.7 million), the four most common or 'vernacular' language groups, typically known as:

- Chinese (Mandarin, Cantonese, Hokkien, Hakka among others),
- Indian (Tamil, Hindi, Telugu, among others),
- Kadazan and Dusun (languages of the main indigenous group, Kadazandusun, in the state of Sabah),
- Iban (language of the main indigenous group, the Iban, in the state of Sarawak).

“

**Malaysia, a mosaic of
different cultures.**

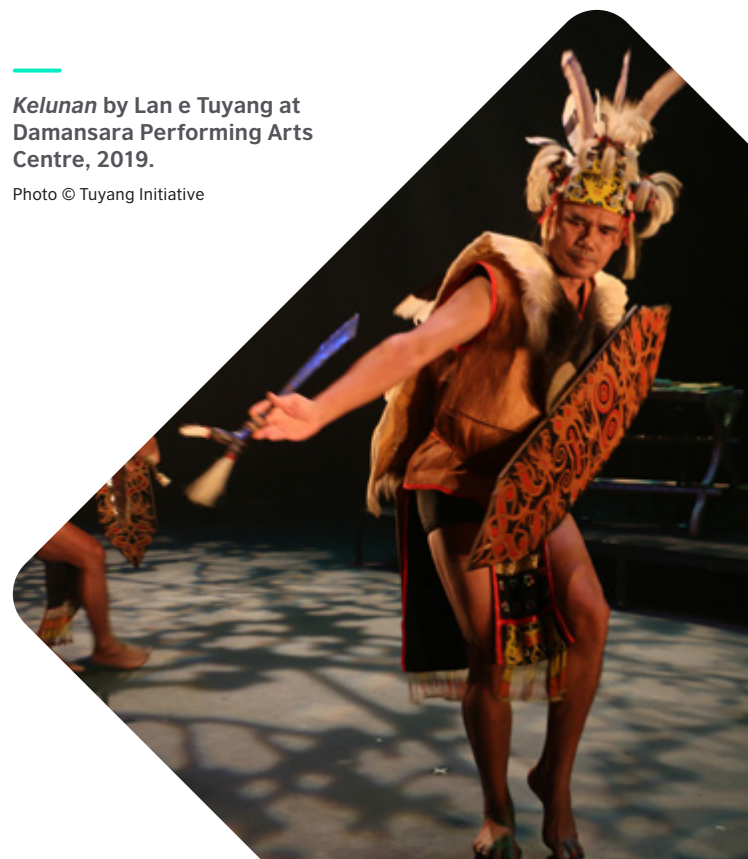
Malaysia Pavilion at Expo Milano 2015⁴

³ Singapore in 1965 seceded from the original federation and became an independent republic. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Malaysia>

⁴ <http://www.expo2015.org/magazine/en/culture/malaysia--a-mosaic-of-different-cultures.html>

Kelunan by Lan e Tuyang at
Damansara Performing Arts
Centre, 2019.

Photo © Tuyang Initiative



Malaysia is also a regionally diverse nation, with distinctive cultural assets across the country and a set of compelling place-based cultural assets. Economically and politically, Kuala Lumpur and the Klang Valley (which includes the administrative capital Putrajaya) have grown in significance over the last 30 years, symbolised by major architecture projects such as the Petronas Towers, or through the growth in key sectors such as financial services, retail and digital.

KL and the Klang Valley, a conurbation of over 8 million, is also a major cultural and creative hub and gateway for talent and investment from across Malaysia. However, the nation's regional diversity remains a significant asset and cities such as Georgetown (Penang), Kuching (Sarawak), Malacca, Ipoh and Johor, have increasingly compelling cultural offers and provide for a different quality of experience to the fast pace of KL.

In addition, the two 'Easts' in Malaysia reflect the spectrum of diversity of culture across the country.

- The 'East' coast of Peninsular Malaysia (Kelantan and Terengganu) is known for its beautiful landscapes and biodiversity. It is also a politically conservative region (governed by the Islamic Party of Malaysia). The state government has instituted selective bans on performing arts with 'guidelines' for organisers e.g. that audiences must be seated according to gender.
- In 'East' Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak states) on Borneo, indigenous groups of Christian and animistic traditions provide an array of historic and distinctive cultures which are quite different to those of Peninsular Malaysia (e.g. alcohol-based drinks are a popular aspect of harvest celebration).

Sabah and Sarawak



East Malaysia, comprising Sabah and Sarawak, is on the rise as an economic and cultural hub, and as a region which connects such activities to inclusive growth and sustainable development.

Sabah and Sarawak have long histories and a rich legacy of traditional crafts and textiles, of music and dance. Inspired by the natural landscape and connected to the flora and fauna of Borneo, this is a region where cultural expression and environmental sustainability converge. The impact of human development is increasingly seen as important for modelling new ways for nature and modernity to co-exist, with cultural practices to the fore.

To this end, Peninsular Malaysian-based organisations such as Yayasan Sime Darby (YSD), the philanthropic arm of the country's trading conglomerate Sime Darby, and the Cultural Economy Development Agency of Malaysia (CENDANA) have also devoted substantial resources to the preservation and conservation of tangible and intangible art, culture and heritage in the region.

Tunku Abdul Rahman Park in Kota Kinabalu.

Photo © Tourism Malaysia



In Malaysia, arts and culture link diverse traditions and distinctive fragile natural environments to a contemporary reality. To develop the creative industries post-Covid, issues of sustainable development come to the fore.

From Rapid Development to Environmental Sustainability

Renowned as one of the 'tiger cub' economies, Malaysia has experienced a robust growth trajectory and is gradually transitioning from a country formerly dependent on agriculture and primary commodities, to a service-led economy, en route to an economy driven by knowledge-intensive, ICT (information and communications technology) and creative industries.

In 2018, Malaysia's federal government issued the TN50 Strategic Plan (Transformation Nasional 2020), with a goal to establish Malaysia as a high-income country by 2020. This government pledge led to substantial investment and growth, resulting in Malaysia as second to China (in the middle-income economy group) and as a 'powerhouse of innovation' in the Global Innovation Index 2020.

Natural Heritage and Climate Crisis

The preservation of forest and heritage has gained popular attention in response to a rapid and unsustainable development approach to planning and deforestation across Malaysia. Environmental crime is still a major issue in Malaysia and the natural and cultural environment is very fragile in many regions. East and rural/ waterfront Malaysia have been most susceptible to the global climate crisis. For example, the traditional longhouse culture in Sarawak is

severely threatened by environmental pollution and floods brought on by global warming.

Malaysia was among the countries with the highest deforestation rate in 2018.⁵

- Aiming at safeguarding natural heritage, the Heart of Borneo Initiative, is a unique government-led and NGO-supported programme that was initiated by a joint Declaration by the governments of Brunei, Indonesia and Malaysia in 2007. This trans-boundary cooperation project saw active public-private partnership to conserve the largest rainforest in Asia.

In Peninsular Malaysia, as a part of the Penang State Government's 2030 Vision, the ambitious Penang South Islands (PSI) master plan aims to transform the state into a sustainable global destination under the theme of 'BiodiverCity'.

- The project includes a major tech campus, designed to attract world-leading tech companies, as well as to nurture the entrepreneurial young local workforce. The project consists of three islands measuring a total of 4,500 acres (with approximately 4.6 km of public beaches, 600 acres of parks and a 25 km waterfront), comprising a variety of mixed-use areas for around 15,000 residents.⁶

⁵ <https://www.malaymail.com/news/life/2019/04/26/report-malaysia-among-countries-with-high-levels-of-deforestation-in-2018/1747149>

⁶ <https://ramboll.com/media/rgr/biodivercity>

The creative community and NGOs have played a leadership role in raising the climate alarm, driving both domestic and international partnerships:

- The International Kuala Lumpur Eco Film Festival (KLEFF)⁷ organised by a non-profit, EcoKnights, is Malaysia's homegrown environmental film festival. For over a decade, the festival has promoted ecological awareness and climate activism.
- The inaugural Ipoh International Art Festival (IIAF 2019)⁸ presented its showcase under the theme, CLIMATE, prioritising works that incorporate recycle/upcycle materials as support to the eco-tourism of Perak state.
- Sasaran International Art Festival/Art Exhibition and its residency programme organised by Sasaran Arts Association⁹ has been a force behind active cultural exchange among Southeast Asian artists, experiencing the tradition and lifestyles of a fishing village in Selangor state.

Gender and Equality



Women in managerial positions increased from 20.4% (2016) to 23.3% (2019), according to Statistica. Grant Thornton's annual Women in Business report found women holding senior leadership positions in Malaysia raises to 37% in 2021. (Source: the Edge Market)

Women own 1 in 5 companies in Malaysia – Gen T female entrepreneurs increasingly harness the power of social media to advance their business and cause, according to Malaysia's Statistics Department. (Source: Tatler)

Life expectancy at birth, (females/males, years): 77.6/72.6 in 2020. (Source: Malaysia's Statistics Department)

In Malaysia, many arts and cultural activities are also impact-facing, especially with regard to the environment and cultural rights

Culture and Social Impact

The cultural sector in Malaysia is increasingly mission or impact-focused, with a growing scene of creative hubs connecting activists, artists and technologists. Agendas often focus on environmental sustainability, inclusion and cultural rights. Freedom of speech is also a major agenda area, given the challenges of censorship in a country where religious conservatism is on the rise.

The 11th Malaysia Plan (2016 – 2020) was a policy document that served as a cornerstone to realise Vision 2020, where productivity and innovation were at the centre of the plan. Six pillars were included and carry influence today:

- Enhancing inclusiveness towards an equitable society
- Improving wellbeing for all
- Accelerating human capital development for an advanced nation
- Pursuing green growth for sustainability and resilience
- Strengthening infrastructure to support economic expansion
- Re-engineering economic growth for greater prosperity

⁷ <https://kleff.my>

⁸ <https://www.portipoh.com.my/phone/ipoh-international-art-festival.html>

⁹ <http://www.sasaranarts.org.my>

Championing Sustainability and Cultural Rights



Climate justice is a hot topic among many grassroots organisers and a new generation of young activists. In a recent forum, the British Council brought together leading voices across Malaysia and the UK to discuss the critical issues and trends in climate change and the role of youth and cultural groups.¹⁰

- Borneo Art Collective (or the Borneo Laboratory) is an online non-profit sharing platform for tangible and intangible Bornean culture.

Wendy Teo, co-founder and architect shared the research and pedagogical approach she and her team at the Borneo Lab focus on, in terms of embedding social-culture dialogue in forming architectural innovation.

- Shaq Koyok is a contemporary artist and activist of the indigenous Temuan tribe of Selangor.

He advocates for land rights and inclusion of the indigenous voice in national narratives, by celebrating and preserving the orang asal tradition and unveiling the systematic disenfranchisement of indigenous communities.¹¹

- Atteleth Don Peris, is the Famelab Malaysia 2020 Champion¹² – a competition that is designed to engage and entertain the public by breaking down scientific knowledge in an approachable manner to raise awareness.

He is currently the Programme Manager for Sustainable Tourism at Reef Check Malaysia¹³ – an NGO that is dedicated to the protection and sustainable management of marine ecosystems. He shared his view on the practice and paradigm shift to eco-conscious sustainable tourism and the importance of co-existing with nature.

The Instrument by Borneo Laboratory at Rainforest Fringe Festival 2018.

Photo © Borneo Laboratory



¹⁰ <https://www.britishcouncil.my/programmes/climate-connection/arc-challenge-malaysia>

¹¹ <https://asasikini.wordpress.com/2020/08/08/interview-with-shaq-koyok-orang-asli-activist-and-artist>

¹² <https://euraxess.ec.europa.eu/worldwide/asean/euraxess-meets-researcher-euraxess-prize-winner-2020-atteleth-don-peris>

¹³ <https://www.reefcheck.org.my>

3

The Malaysian Cultural and Creative Industries: Policy and Strategic Landscape

Malaysia has a variously integrated and coordinated policy approach to culture, creativity, digital and wider agendas for inclusive growth and sustainable development

“

The concept of creative industries has been in use since the 1990s and marks a broad wave of the digital era. In the post-industrial service economy, creativity has emerged as a prime driver in developing a knowledge economy — the quaternary sector.

The Future of Creative Industries in Penang, Fernandez, Lim and Pan, 2019, p.1

Malaysia's current policy response and environment for creative industries lie with multiple agencies, schemes and programmes. The arts sector is overseen by the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MoTAC) – and its agency National Department for Culture and Arts (Jabatan Kebudayaan dan Kesenian Negara, JKKN).

Policy direction and funding for the creative industries is overseen by the Ministry of Communication & Multimedia Malaysia (MCMC, also known as Kementerian Komunikasi dan Multimedia Malaysia) and PEMANDU, the Prime Minister's Office, oversees the Economic Transformation Programme (ETP).

Sitting under the ETP are a set of priority sectors known as the National Key Economic Area (NKEA)¹⁴ which include the Infrastructure and Communication Technology as a highlight area. Under this strand, Nurturing Malaysia's Creative Content programme is a key focus that aims to deliver high-impact infrastructure investment.

¹⁴ 12 economics sectors under NKEA in total, including (1) Oil, Gas and Energy, (2) Palm Oil, (3) Financial Services, (4) Tourism, (5) Business Services, (6) Electronics and Electrical, (7) Wholesale and Retail, (8) Education, (9) Health, (10) Information and Communication Technology, (11) Agriculture, (12) Greater Kuala Lumpur. <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2018/04/351919/nkeas-boost-nations-foundation>

A Growing Creative Economy



Art, culture and the creative industries play a critical part in the country's social and economic outlook. Rooted in diverse cultural traditions and powered by digitalisation and a design-savvy population, Malaysia has a significant and fast-changing creative economy.

Malaysia's gross output of the arts, entertainment and recreation services recorded value: RM22.3 billion (£3.82 billion) in 2017.¹⁵

- Sports and recreation activities recorded the highest value added in 2017 which amounted to RM7.8 billion (£1.34 billion or 81.1%).
- This was followed by museums, amusement and cultural activities (RM1.5 billion ~ £0.2 billion; 15.4%) and creative, arts and entertainment activities (RM0.3 billion ~ £52 million; 3.5%).

MCMC and PEMANDU operate a number of different schemes and programmes, designed to encourage and support creative business and productions. Various agencies and arm's length organisations play an important role of investment and development for cultural sub-sectors:

- Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation (MDEC, formerly Multimedia Development), founded in 1990s
- Cultural Economy Development Agency (CENDANA) through the government investment arm MyCreative Ventures; National Film Development Corporation Malaysia (Perbadanan Kemajuan Filem Nasional Malaysia, FINAS), and
- The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC).

The Malaysian National Creative Industry Policy (DIKN)



Since the 2000s, the Malaysian Dasar Industri Kreatif Negara (DIKN: The Malaysian National Creative Industry Policies) has identified the creative industries as a policy focus.

DIKN was introduced to raise public awareness, improve quality, and enlarge the domestic or international market of the country's creative industries. The cultural and creative industries were categorised into three main areas in the DIKN planning:

- Multimedia creative industry: film and TV, advertising, design, animation and digital, content
- Cultural arts creative industry: crafts, visual arts, music, performing arts, creative writing, fashion and textiles
- Cultural heritage creative industry: museum, archives, restoration, preservation.

However, with the Ministry of Information, Communication and Culture renamed (into the Ministry of Communications and Multimedia Malaysia), DIKN risks losing policy relevance.¹⁶

¹⁵ Department of Statistics Malaysia Official Portal <https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1>

¹⁶ p.3, Fernandez, Lim and Pan 2019

Malaysia has an increasingly well-structured, supported and networked creative industries sector, with new development programmes and national commitment to the creative industries as a vital contributor to a diverse and sustainable economy.

Creative Industries Investment and Development

A range of platforms and development structures have been set up to aid creative economy development. These include:

- MyCreative Ventures was established to provide loans to creative businesses. It provides the governance for a range of targeted sector development initiatives, including the Cultural Economy Development Agency (CENDANA) (see below).
- A dedicated agency, Cultural Economy Development Agency (CENDANA) was set up by former Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak in 2017, to empower the creative industry with resource, expertise and data. This was a key outcome of the Kuala Lumpur Creative Economy Blueprint, the country's first strategic baseline mapping study for the creative industries.¹⁷
- This Blueprint recommended the establishment of an arm's length development agency for the creative economy – with a focus on empowering,

energising and reorganising the sector. As a result, CENDANA was set up by the Malaysian government to 'build a vibrant, sustainable and ambitious cultural economy for Malaysia'.¹⁸

- It has proven vital for many arts makers during the pandemic, providing seed and support funding for performing arts, visual arts, independent music (and as expected soon, literature).

With a goal to transform Malaysia into a cultural destination, it aims to function as a connector between creators, regulating bodies, private investors or businesses, policymakers and consumers. RM20 million (£3.4 billion) was initially allocated to spearhead arts and cultural development in Malaysia.¹⁹

- Other programmes and agencies – such as Think City (a subsidiary of Malaysia's Sovereign Wealth Fund) was set up with a focus on urban revitalisation and creative solutions.

¹⁷ Led by TFCC with Frost and Sullivan MY. The British Council also had an advisory role.

¹⁸ <https://www.cendana.com.my>

¹⁹ The Star, May 2019. <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2017/09/17/cendana-to-launch-its-first-arts-funding-programme>

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... to build a vibrant, sustainable and ambitious cultural economy for Malaysia.

CENDANA official website

Philanthropy

Private sector and government-linked corporations are re-thinking the approach to arts and cultural funding. Malaysia has relatively advanced public private partnerships for culture and the creative economy – as demonstrated in the KL Creative Economy Blueprint, where the private sector and NGOs provided oversight and leadership. Examples of private philanthropy in the arts, include:

- Maybank Kim Eng: Maybank's Investment Banking group has sponsored the 'KataKatha' exhibition initiative²⁰ for several years. The corporation is now looking to encourage higher participation by women at senior management level.²¹
- Chandran Nair: a Malaysian businessman and founder of The Global Institute for Tomorrow, an independent think-tank based in Hong Kong. Nair founded and acts as project director of The Other Hundred, an international photography competition and photo-book project that strives to challenge racial and socio-cultural stereotypes.²²
- BOH Cameronian Arts Awards is an annual non-profit operation in partnership with BOH Plantations that celebrates performing arts excellence in Malaysia.²³
- Yayasan Hasanah is a high-impact grant-making foundation focusing on community and social issues. It contributes to 15 of the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), through solutions that empower communities, encourage social inclusivity, and improve the environment.²⁴

Yayasan Sime Darby



Yayasan Sime Darby (YSD), the philanthropic arm of the country's trading conglomerate Sime Darby. The foundation offers grants and scholarship with a focus on:

- Education
- Environment
- Community and health
- Sports
- Arts and culture.

New ways of funding allocation are now being explored, such as how the arts may work as a common denominator for all categories

(CENDANA: Creative Economy 2021 forum)

Hub For Good Funding Workshop by British Council

Photo © Tang Chun Cheuh

²⁰ <https://maybankfoundation.com/index.php/our-impact/katakatha>

²¹ CENDANA: Creative Economy 2021 forum.

²² <https://www.theotherhundred.com>

²³ <http://kakiseni.org/about-us>

²⁴ <https://yayasanhasanah.org>



Malaysia is an active international partner in cultural relations and agendas linked to the sustainable development goals (e.g. smart cities and inclusive growth).

International Cultural Relations and Exchange

The foreign policy of Malaysia is comprised of three pillars: politics, commerce and civil society. While the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) is the lead agency that deals with multilateral relationships, other governmental department such as the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) and the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MoTAC) also plans significant roles according to respective areas of responsibilities.²⁵

Cultural soft power is a key focus of MoFA's public diplomacy strategy. This includes:

- Improvement for two-way communication with the public,
- Organisation of regular dialogues, seminars and for a with stakeholder,
- Regular showcase of Malaysian cultural identity and contribution to the international community,
- Increase collaboration with academic and cultural institutions (universities, cultural groups, think tanks), and
- Engagement with sports diplomacy.

Bilateral Cultural Cooperation Ties



The Department of Multilateral Affairs²⁶ at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) formulates bilateral ties with countries around the world, where art and culture play a part.²⁷

Preferential conditions such as tax and fee exemptions under such treaties might be detailed in co-production agreement, Cultural Agreement or Memorandum of Understanding.

- Agreement on Cultural Cooperation with Portugal
- Co-production agreement in film with Australia
- Agreement on cultural and scientific cooperation with Romania

²⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA). Foreign Policy Framework of the New Malaysia: Change in Continuity. 2019 <https://www.kln.gov.my/foreign-policy-framework/#29/z>

²⁶ <https://www.kln.gov.my/web/guest/department-of-multilateral-affairs>

²⁷ <https://culture360.asef.org/wp-content/blogs.dir/1/files/MappingAsiaEurope.pdf>

Other bilateral cultural cooperation exists with foreign cultural institutions such as with the Alliance Française de Kuala Lumpur (French Art Festival), the British Council, Goethe-Institut, the Japan Foundation, the Lincoln Centre, US Embassy, and so on.

Malaysia is an active member of ASEAN and has engaged in multiple cultural exchange, networking and showcasing activities. This operates at an inter-

governmental, inter-municipality and inter-organisational level. George Town is part of the Southeast Asia Creative Cities Network (SEACCN). The International Federation of Arts Councils and Culture Agencies held their 8th World Summit on Arts and Culture in Kuala Lumpur in March 2019. Other regional partnerships and collaborations are featured throughout each chapter of this Insights report.

Malaysia is a significant digital pioneer with clusters of 'born global' digital pioneers and centres of excellence in activities such as animation, software and immersive technology.

A Digitally-Driven Creative Economy

In the late-1990s, national investment was committed to the development of digital technology, establishing a Silicon Valley-inspired science park Cyberjaya²⁸ to bootstrap the country into a knowledge-intensive and information-based modern economy for Wawasan 2020 (Vision 2020) by promoting technology transfer and leveraging the nation's educated workforce.

- This multimedia super corridor spans over 7K acres and now hosts a multimedia university and headquarters of international IT firms. Generous incentives were provided to local and foreign ICT and technology companies under the MSC Status scheme if they relocated operations to the Corridor.
- This formulated a significant anchor of the special economic zone MSC Malaysia, extending from the Petronas Twin Towers to the Kuala Lumpur International Airport, and including the towns of Putrajaya and Cyberjaya. (Animation, special effects, content production and later mobile application are a focus for government funding.)
- MDEC keeps a directory²⁹ of cybercities and cybercentres, digital hubs, digital maker hubs (for educators and students), as well as an animation centre Kre8tif! Inc. formerly known as Malaysia Animation Creative Content Centre (MAC3).

- Malaysia launched the world's first Digital Free Trade Zone (DFTZ) which aims to double the growth rate of SMEs' goods export by 2025. The contribution of digital economy to national GDP was set to exceed 20 per cent by 2020.³⁰
- As at end of 2019, the DFTZ has impacted over 13,000 local SMEs gaining access to regional and global e-Commerce markets, growing from about 2,000 at the end of 2017.

The percentage of individuals who use the internet rose to 84.2% in 2019 (urban 87.5% vs rural 72.7%) according to the 2020 voluntary national review published by the Department of Statistics.



²⁸ <https://www.cyberjayamalaysia.com.my>

²⁹ <https://mdec.my/what-we-offer/cybercities-cybercentres-digital-hubs>

³⁰ <https://www.matrade.gov.my/en/digital-free-trade-zone-dftz>



MyDIGITAL is a national initiative which symbolises the aspirations of the Government to successfully transform Malaysia into a digitally-driven, high income nation and a regional digital economy leader.

Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint, p.10

The Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint³¹ released in 2021 saw the launch of MyDIGITAL to accelerate the country's progress as a technologically-driven economy. It aims to pivot to the opportunities of eCommerce and bridge the digital divide. Through this plan, by 2025, the digital economy is expected to contribute 22.6% to Malaysia's GDP and to create 500,000 job opportunities in the digital economy.

The Digital Economy Blueprint is a critical aspect of the Twelfth Malaysia Plan, 2021 – 2025 (RMKe-12), and the realisation of the policy document Wawasan Kemakmuran Bersama 2030 (Shared Prosperity Vision 2030). Six strategic thrusts are presented to achieve 'inclusive, responsible and sustainable socioeconomic development',³² including:

- Digital transformation in the public sector,
- Boost economic competitiveness through digitalisation,
- Build enabling digital infrastructure,
- Build agile and competent digital talent,
- Create an inclusive digital society,
- Build trusted, secure and ethical digital environment.

Kuala Lumpur/ Klang Valley



Software industry (52%), architecture (13%) and filming industries (12%) are the dominant creative sectors in Greater KL as of 2018. 69% of the cultural services in Greater KL encompasses education centres, followed by religious (11%) and art centres (8%).³³

While planned development and urban connectivity is impressive, regional disparity with digital infrastructure remains a problem, where poorer coverage for broadband and internet access (hovering around 50 – 60%) on the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia and in East Malaysia.

³¹ <https://www.epu.gov.my/sites/default/files/2021-02/malaysia-digital-economy-blueprint.pdf>

³² p.10, Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint, 2021.

³³ <https://maps.thinkcity.com.my/think-city/maps/91785/creative-industries-and-cultural-services#>

High Use of Social Media

Malaysia is a very digitally savvy nation, with high social media use. Digital retail is less advanced than in other markets, with a preference for location-based consumption (such as in the plethora of malls). However, online retail and other service provision is set to grow over the next few years accelerated by Covid-19.

- Social media sites (72%) is the top first preferred channel, followed by word of mouth (60%). Similar findings within arts & cultural engagers and potential.³⁴
- Strong majority (9 out of 10 people interviewed) often purchase arts and cultural products/activities through retail outlets. Online purchase via desktop and notebook comes second, followed by online purchase via mobile applications.³⁵

Tiktok



Young dancer and choreographer, Iqram Azhar @kenapawak has built a base of over 470,000 followers with 6.3 million likes (31 January 2021).

- Posted over 829 videos to date
- Makes living online, paid by advertisers keen to reach follower base

Malaysia has an emergent creative education offer. It offers fertile ground for new skills and talent development programmes and for creative educators looking for new institutions and networks to develop their work.

Toward a Creative Education

Creative and cultural education is still an emergent agenda in Malaysia – from early years to tertiary and HEI.³⁶ In the Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint, the government pledges to develop creative thinking among students and aims to transform ‘students from consumers to producers of technology’, by equipping pupils and faculty members with the digital skills and tools to ‘cultivate adaptability skills and innovative mindsets’.³⁷

The first tertiary college to exclusively focus on arts and culture, Akademi Seni Kebangsaan (National Arts Academy) was set up in 1994. This became ASWARA (which will soon have University status) – the country’s

leading creative education establishment. It convenes international expertise across different art forms and some excellent facilities, especially for performing arts. In addition to ASWARA, several colleges and universities in Malaysia provide diploma, undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in arts and arts-related subjects. These include Universiti Sains Malaysia in Peninsular Malaysia but also younger colleges and universities in Sabah (Universiti Malaysia Sabah, the Sabah Institute of Art) and in Sarawak (Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, UNIMAS). Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI) is an important partner in dance education.

³⁴ MyPAA: Frost & Sullivan, 2017.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ CENDANA, 2018

³⁷ p.62, Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint, 2021.

The number of private and international universities located in Malaysia which provide arts education has also increased to include:

- Sunway University
- Taylor's University, and
- Malaysian campuses of selected British and Australian universities – the University of Nottingham, Reading University, Monash University, Curtin University, and Swinburne University (Sarawak).

While creative education in Malaysia is not yet widely valued as a central pathfinder for personal and professional development under the formal education system, community groups have stepped up to provide alternative solutions.

- Founded in 2014, Arus Academy³⁸ is a social enterprise that provides after-school classes that covers design thinking, project management, presentation, programming and coding skills.
- Their approach encourages students to critically and creatively problem-solve with an entrepreneurial spirit by building their own physical and digital solutions. Arus' main space and office, located in Penang, recently unveiled a Maker Studio at the Selangor Digital Creative Centre.
- Private companies are active providers of training and upskilling programmes for traditional art forms – such as in the cases of The Temple of Fine Arts Malaysia³⁹ and Sutra Foundation.⁴⁰

Intergenerational Knowledge Transfer



Arts-ED⁴¹ since 2010 has brought creative education to more than 16,000 students in Malaysia.

They offer community-based, practice-oriented programmes to promote cultural sustainability and placemaking, with the aim of achieving social

development, inter-generational knowledge/experience transfer and capacity building.

Arts-ED is a pioneer in intergenerational cultural interaction and transmission – to promote cultural sustainability and placemaking.⁴²

³⁸ <https://www.arusacademy.org.my>

³⁹ <http://www.tfa.org.my/#!home.html>

⁴⁰ <https://www.sutrafoundation.org.my>

⁴¹ <https://www.arts-ed.my>

⁴² https://creativehubs.my/creative_hub/arts-ed

Malaysia is a place where you can plug in and play, with a dynamic creative urbanism and hub scene where activism and creative practice co-exist.

Toward a Creative Urbanism

Malaysia, which has seen a generation of rapid urbanisation and the growth of a middle class with greater spending power and more leisure time, has seen signs of urban renaissance. The restoration of heritage landscapes in, for example, George Town, Johor Bahru and Ipoh, has been followed by the development of dynamic creative hubs, often in historic buildings and neighbourhoods. The country has an active urban planning and place-making movement, with Government-backed agencies such as Think City working alongside community-driven and creative-led activities to re-imagine and regenerate the urban landscape. Robust bottom-up movements have led to a rise of alternative spaces which act as critical anchors for activism.⁴³ For example:

- Hin Bus Depot⁴⁴ in Penang was initiated by a group of artists in 2014 in a derelict bus depot. It is home to murals that voices concern over social inequalities.⁴⁵ The hub also organises weekly pop-up market to invigorate local crafts and independent handmade practices.

- Based in the old street lanes of China Town, Kuala Lumpur, Kwai Chai Hong⁴⁶ is a grassroots movement which reacts against rapid urbanisation through self-sponsored conservation projects to preserve community memory and the cultural landscape.
- Rakan Mantin is an informal community-based arts and cultural platform that organises with Facebook to muster support to preserve the traditional Hakka village of Mantin, raising awareness via social activism against community displacement.
- PLACEMAKING Malaysia⁴⁷ is a newly formed global network of leaders who together accelerate placemaking as a way to create healthy, inclusive, and beloved communities.

A community workshop session by Arts-ED.

Photo © Arts-ED



⁴³ p.2, BC Connecting Creative Communities: Creative Hubs in Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines (2017).

⁴⁴ <https://hinbusdepot.com/index.html>

⁴⁵ <https://theculturetrip.com/asia/malaysia/articles/the-hin-bus-depot-penangs-centre-of-subculture>

⁴⁶ <https://www.kwaichaihong.com>

⁴⁷ <https://www.placemakingx.org/about>



A creative hub is: ‘A place, either physical or virtual, which brings creative people together. It is a convenor, providing space and support for networking, business development and community engagement within the creative, cultural and tech sectors.

Creative HubKit, British Council, 2015, p.4

Fast-changing Creative Hub Scene

In Malaysia, the cultural and creative hubs scene is vibrant. Mostly self-funded and often started as make-shift alternative spaces, creative hubs in Malaysia are relatively fragile in comparison to more established western models, but they are dynamic, fast-moving and provide vital safe spaces for creative exchange, collaboration, residencies and market-making.

Additional Resources

- Directory of creative hubs and funding resources: Mapping Creative Hubs in Malaysia, British Council (2017) https://creativeconomy.britishcouncil.org/media/resources/Malaysia_Creative_Hubs_Report_final.pdf
- Turner, R. Situational Analysis of Creative Hubs in Malaysia: Situation Hubs for Good Malaysia Report. (2020) https://creativeconomy.britishcouncil.org/media/resources/Situational_Analysis_Creative_Hubs_Malaysia_201920.pdf

#HubsforGood



Hubs for Good is a collaboration between The British Council, Yayasan Sime Darby, and the Cultural Centre, Universiti Malaya. The three-year programme involved several interrelated projects; a country-wide mapping and research, a toolkit for the use of creative hub leaders and creative practitioners, a digital platform, and capacity building activities to address skill and knowledge needs of local creative hub leaders.

The Hubs for Good programme covers five countries in Southeast Asia and supports creative hubs as key drivers and catalysts for good in cities. The programme focuses on enhancing the positive role of creative hubs in an urban context for socioeconomic, political and cultural change.

Find a creative hub in Malaysia:
<https://creativehubs.my>

Chapter 2: Design and the Wider Creative Industries

With thanks to William-Harald Wong
for comments and input

1

Sector Profile

Creative Industries

This Chapter provides a brief overview of the Malaysian creative industries (as a prefix to sectors profiled in the coming chapters). It focuses most on the Malaysian design sector (from urban to fashion design).

Malaysia has a burgeoning creative economy, albeit one in considerable pain due to the Covid-19 crisis. The country's growing middle class, digital literacy and appetite for conspicuous consumption (from fashion to games), have provided fertile ground for creative enterprises across every sector.

This has been backed by a growing policy commitment to the creative industries, with the establishment of CENDANA as the government's specialist development agency, signalling genuine intent to bootstrap creativity as a vital part of the country's economy.

According to CENDANA, the creative industries contributed RM29.4 million (~ £5.26 million) in 2019. Among which, the multimedia sector accounted for over half of overall contribution to the creative economy while the culture and art sector overwhelmingly employs the biggest portion of creative workers (75%).⁴⁸

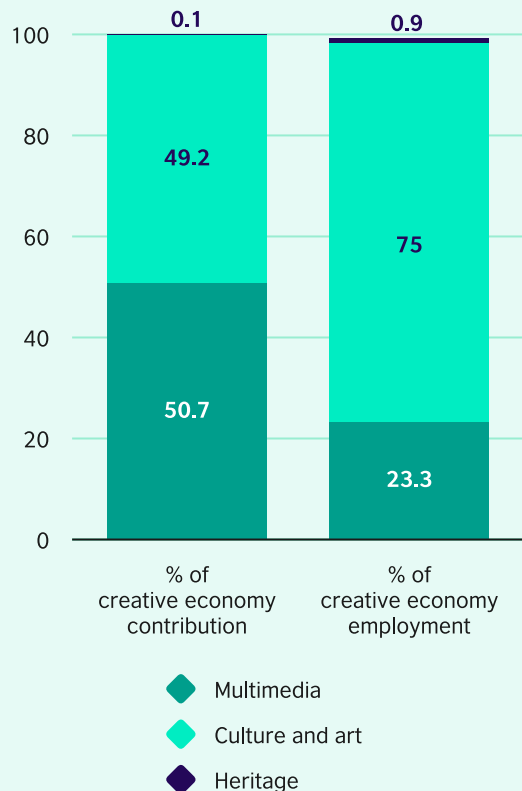
There were over 31,000 creative enterprises in Malaysia in 2020 – a 10% year-on-year growth since 2015. In 2019, the sector employed 0.8 million people.⁴⁹

Despite the stable increase in GDP contribution, the year-on-year employment the creative industry accounts hovers at around 6% and decreased to 5.7% in 2019.⁵⁰

However, this data is likely to significantly underestimate the size of the Malaysian creative industries, with many enterprises very small and difficult to trace in official data, plus patchy available data provided by sector mapping studies.

To date, the Klang Valley is the only part of Malaysia for which any baseline research has been undertaken to

Figure 1 Creative economy contribution in 2019



(CENDANA, 2020)

understand the profile and dynamics of Malaysia's entire creative industries. This was through a Creative Economy Blueprint for KL and the Klang Valley – undertaken by TFCC⁵¹ with Frost & Sullivan and MY Performing Arts Agency.

⁴⁸ CENDANA. Overview of the Creative Industry of Malaysia and Its Future Outlook. Creative Economy 2021 Forum. Oct 2020.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ www.tfconsultancy.co.uk

Malaysia's creative industries was, until Covid-19 struck, growing fast and driving innovation across the economy. This is particularly the case with design – from product and service design through to urban design and architecture. Through a combination of internationally educated and trained talent and a growing cohort of homegrown talents, Malaysia's design sector is on the rise. This is apparent in the burgeoning contemporary architecture scene, in the growth of design and fashion retail, and the proliferation of lifestyle brands.

The **major opportunity for the UK** is to tap into, be inspired by, and explore collaborations with the Malaysian creative industries. The country is bursting with fresh talents and these talents are often very digitally literate, technically sound, and displaying a mission- or impact-facing approach. The rise of ethical design and fashion is a case in point, with the diversity of Malaysia providing the enabling environment for innovative approaches to inclusion and sustainability.

Covid-19 Relief

The PENJANA Plan for the Creative Industries is a range of recovery initiatives to reboot the art and cultural sector, under the Government's PENJANA Short-Term Economic Recovery Plan, administered and managed by MyCreative Ventures and CENDANA and supervised by Ministry of Communications and Multimedia. RM10 million is dedicated to performing arts, visual arts, independent music and the craft sector.⁵²

- It includes five new initiatives (arts organisation resilience funding programme, arts venue recovery programme, performing arts presentation funding programme, CENDANA crafts industry choice, art in the city public art commission programme), alongside

enhancement of existing funding programmes (independent music, visual arts showcase, visual arts inspire – research and excursion, Create Now, Artists in school, ACE workshop by the Arts Sector.)

- In addition, the recovery scheme works with local corporate foundation, Yayasan Sime Darby to distribute food aid to artists.

Additional support managed by MyCreative Ventures under PENJANA plan for the creative industry covers the wider entertainment, film and publishing industries, featuring grants that encourages digital marketing, promotion, exhibition, and creation.

Design

Malaysia's design industry is dynamic – it celebrates a fusion of design thinking with traditional crafts and multicultural aesthetics. In recent years, there has been an increasing focus on design and design thinking as a solution for inclusive growth and sustainable development. This is part of a push for bottom-up involvement in urban planning.

The design industry is composed of a wide range of practice, from in-house design firm/team, to design consultancies and freelance designers as well as the various stakeholders critical to the value chain regarding the planning, production, distribution and consumption of design.

Art sharing session at Kota-K.

Photo © Kota-K



⁵² <http://www.mycreative.com.my/penjana>

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Design offers solutions to some of the challenges of large-scale urban systems – e.g. how public services are run, traffic is managed, and liveability enhanced.

Kuala Lumpur as a Cultural and Creative City, CENDANA, 2018, p.15⁵³

Due to the nature of this work, the design sector most frequently crosses paths with communications/ advertising, digital and multimedia, interior and exhibition, product and industrial, fashion and services disciplines.

As higher education institutions with an art and design focus are becoming more accessible, the domestic talent pool has shown significant growth. The scaling up of capacity and innovation in design is vital for Malaysia's overall creative economy, with growing competition from China as well as neighbours Thailand, Singapore and Philippines, each of which has developed a suite of policy activities related to product, service and industrial design.⁵⁴



Malaysia ranked

40

on the World Design Ranking, with a total of 66 award

World Design Ranking is sponsored by A Design Award and Competition, and only ranks entries entered.

⁵³ Cultural Economy Development Agency (CENDANA), Kuala Lumpur as a Cultural and Creative City. 2018 https://www.cendana.com.my/clients/Cendana_78A7CADC-1C4A-44E8-A815-E2B4C1D11FE0/contentms/img/Documents/Cendana%20Report%20Web%2006_02_18.pdf

⁵⁴ Mohamad, N., Kaspin, S., Noor, R. Md., Malaysia Design Industry: Competition For Malaysia Design Business 2013 (2017).

2 Distinctive Qualities

The multicultural aesthetics and traditional craft, materials and techniques, provide a great asset base for Malaysian design and a set of influences for the design community to draw on. As products are often consumer-oriented and multicultural by nature, market segments often cross ethnic lines.

In Malaysia, designers and creative entrepreneurs are often active conveners and community-organisers, often the linchpin of multidisciplinary hubs and discussions.

Gen T designers are riding the wave of self-media and the reach of digital marketplace to place their mark.⁵⁵ Interdisciplinary and cross-genre collaboration has also become increasingly prevalent.

Inter-disciplinary Collaboration

As a polymath, artist and designer Nawwar Shukriah Ali⁵⁶ has not only directed music videos but also creates sets with her contemporary art installation designs.

Often going by her alias Bono Stellar, she frequently speaks at events and festivals such as the Cyberjaya Multimedia Festival (CMF) and has contributed to an installation for the Kuala Lumpur-based leading Urbanscapes Festival in 2018. Her commercial clients include BMW and L'Officiel, to name a few.

41%

purchased arts and crafts product for own collection

Average spending per year

RM481

92% self-funded

(CENDANA)

Baskets woven by Sarawakian weavers sold under the Raneer Artisan Gallery.

Photo © KitaKita

⁵⁵ <https://my.asiatatler.com/society/meet-our-tatler-tribe-for-gent-2020>

⁵⁶ <http://www.nawwarshukriahali.com>



Textile, Crafts, Artisanry and Maker's Tradition

Malaysia has an established craft tradition and a vibrant industry around making and artisanries, where non-metropolitan areas are key hubs for production while the metropolitan areas function as point of sales and retail. Textile activities have been an engine for employment and contributes substantially to cultural distinctiveness – e.g. a convergence of Malay, Chinese and Indian influences.⁵⁷

- Recent exhibition *Common Threads – A showcase of contemporary textile* by contemporary art gallery The Back Room maps the genealogy, transformation and its contemporary life of the medium.⁵⁸
- Catama Borneo is a social enterprise working with rural indigenous communities in Sarawak to develop heritage crafts into contemporary design.

Eco Awareness



Design is showing a 'decentralisation' from the KL Region. Designers from Johor, Sabah and Sarawak have been increasingly active – specifically in terms of incorporating traditional culture and rethink of balance with nature into their works. Sustainability-minded, eco-friendliness are making their way into not only product design but also the design process.⁵⁹

Johor artists Beng Lim and Jo Wong, Xiapism employ a traditional dyeing technique that originated from fishermen who discovered mangrove tannin could strengthen their fishing nets and make clothes dry faster. The artisan group brings this traditional technique into a dye-based design line of eco-friendly products, from bags to passport holders, using the strengthening mangrove tannin.

Built, Architectural and Interior Design

Malaysia's built and architectural design has been closely linked with the country's ambition to elevate its international prestige with ambitious architectural projects that boost technical and artistic excellence. The iconic Petronas Twin Towers in Kuala Lumpur (completed in 1995) and the surrounding KLCC Park are symbols of Malaysia's arrival as an international player in design and architecture (although the towers were designed by Argentine-American architect César Pelli).

Coupled with a boom in residential and commercial property market, a more recent focus of the Economic Transformation Programme and Vision 2020 is to transform the Greater Kuala Lumpur/Klang Valley into a 'top livable city'. This has provided much business opportunities for architectural and design firms to develop new markets orientated toward a more progressive type of urbanism.

Sarawakian architect Mike Boon is a stellar example of balancing urban development, architectural intervention and heritage preservation.

- Mike Boon graduated with a Bachelor of Architecture from the University of Western Australia in 1989 and has been practicing in Kuching. Boon has gained attention for his efforts in conserving heritage buildings in Sarawak. Following his involvement in the restoration of the Kuching Old Court House project in 2002, Mike has been actively promoting heritage conservation in Sarawak. Besides working closely with the State Government on the conservation of heritage buildings, he is also a consultant for similar projects in the Southeast Asia region.⁶⁰ Boon has received multiple recognition for his projects, Pertubuhan Arkitek Malaysia (PAM) Awards – the highest national award for architecture, including the 2010 winner of the Public and Civic Building Category for his design of the tidal bore observatory that co-exists harmoniously with the century-old heritage Fort Alice in Kuching, an Honorary Mention (second prize) for the conservation of the Square Tower along the Kuching waterfront and a Mention (third prize) for the Sibu Central Police Station, and many others that followed.

⁵⁷ CENDANA, 2018.

⁵⁸ <https://www.thebackroomkl.com/exhibitions/common-threads-a-showcase-of-contemporary-textiles>

⁵⁹ <https://penangartdistrict.com/5-creative-entrepreneurs-putting-innovative-spins-on-traditional-crafts>

⁶⁰ <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/community/2010/11/22/multiaward-winning-architects-works-are-steeped-in-conservation>



Campbell Street Market, a heritage building in George Town Penang.

Photo © Bryan Chang



Creativity Powerhouse – Where Big Ideas Happen



Rimbun Dahan (Selangor) is the home of architect Hijjas Kasturi and his wife Angela. It is a hub where a multitude of creative practices meet and collaborate.

Rimbun Dahan runs a flagship residency programme for interdisciplinary art practices, ranging from visual artists, dancers, choreographers, writers, arts managers, curators

and researchers as well as educational opportunities for students of architecture, ecology and botany.

While mostly focusing on elevating the profile of Malaysian practitioner, it also provides space rental and cultural exchange programming with international artists.⁶¹

Local architectural collectives and urban design teams are also critical contributors to the design ecosystem in Malaysia. They often champion preservation movements and pioneer social design approaches in terms of place-making and community building.

- For example, Think City⁶² is a pioneer for re-imagining cities to become sustainable and inclusive. Think City is a social purpose organisation with the mission of making cities more people-friendly, resilient and livable. As a regional city-making agency in receipt of Government

investment, Think City provides urban policy thinking, management and implementation of urban solutions, while acting as a catalyst for change in the way cities are planned, curated, developed, and celebrated.

- Think City has led some major city transformation programmes, including the sensitive long-term urban heritage revitalisation programme in George Town, Penang. It has mobilised a new generation of urbanists and urban design specialists and spun-out exciting place-making firms such as Tempatico.⁶³



We make cities people-friendly and resilient by being a catalyst for change in the way cities are planned, curated, developed, and celebrated.

Think City

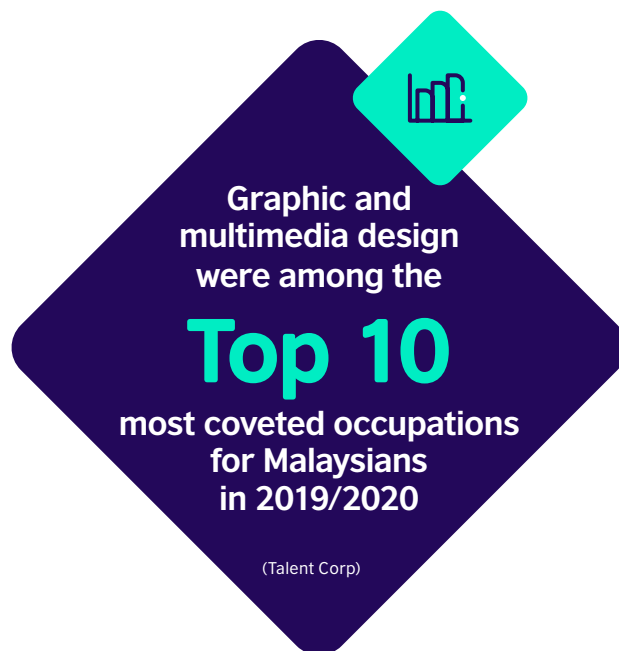
⁶¹ <https://rimbundahan.org/about>

⁶² <https://thinkcity.com.my>

⁶³ <https://tempatico.com>

Graphic, Animation and Digital Design

Thriving with significant Government investment, digital design such as gaming, web design and mobile app development are vital parts of the Malaysian creative economy story. They also benefit from a flexible production-distribution process which is not subject to traditional regulations, unlike film and video content.⁶⁴ See **Chapter 4** on film, TV and audiovisual for more insights.



Fashion, Product and Industrial Design

Fashion design and haute couture an arena where Malaysian designers frequently shine. This includes global brands such as Jimmy Choo, who started as a Malaysian Chinese designer and worked his way to become an international luxury powerhouse.

- Product design and fashion are fast-growing parts of the economy – especially in developing economies with expanding buying power.⁶⁵



⁶⁴ Barker, T. and Lee, Y. B., Making Creative Industries Policy: the Malaysian Case, Kajian Malaysia, vol. 35, no. 2 (2017) [http://web.usm.my/km/35\(2\)2017/km35022017_2.pdf](http://web.usm.my/km/35(2)2017/km35022017_2.pdf)

⁶⁵ CENDANA, 2018.

Market-place Dependent vs Trade Acceleration



Kuala Lumpur Fashion Week (KLFW) is the country's major fashion event and has become a fixture since 2013. Its fanfare and track record has attracted stable corporate sponsorship from design and technology-related international firms such as Huawei, HP, Lexus, Panasonic; and international hospitality chains.

- Heritage-minded, KLFW 2019 included a partnership with the Malaysian batik pioneer, Kraftangan Malaysia provided batik textiles to 2 Kraftangan in-house designers and 4 young

designers to design a range of modern and contemporary pieces to be showcased.

- Dialogues and events around design, manufacturing, inventory, new technologies, distribution channels and customer relations often accompany the main fashion shows as satellite events.
- In its 2020 edition, due to the pandemic, KLFW launched its first online edition. This focused on the power of the digital marketplace and sustainability in fashion design.



The Kuala Lumpur Fashion Week is a platform that does more than just showing the latest collections from many of our Malaysian designers. It is an incubation and networking hub for our bravest and brightest creative minds to facilitate and further their businesses. Whether selling to consumers or pitching to potential buyers, it is without a doubt that KLFW is also a trade accelerating event.

Andrew Tan, Founder of Kuala Lumpur Fashion Week⁶⁶

⁶⁶ <http://klfashionweek.website/founders-note-2019>

3 Design: Policy and Partnership

Since the early 1990s, the Malaysian government has joined its regional neighbours in promoting the value and power of design as parts of its ambition to transform its economy to be knowledge and service based. A DIKN policy paper outlines design as one of the pillars of the creative industries and calls for a more coordinated 'design push'.

Product-oriented and market-driven, government agencies such as the Malaysia Design Development Centre (DDEC) and Malaysia Design Council (MRM) provide training and capacity building to help the vast array of workers in the design sector to increase business acumen and digital literacy for a contemporary marketplace.

Perbadanan Kemajuan Kraftangan Malaysia, **Malaysian Handicraft Development Corporation** is the key agency under the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture Malaysia (MoTAC), responsible for the promotion and commercialisation of the country's craft industry.

Malaysia Design Development Centre (DDEC) is a national design centre, founded under the then Ministry of Entrepreneurs & Corporation Development (MeCD) in 2006, to advance business development of design as an industry and potential of design as a commercial tool. DDEC helps SMEs and local Malaysian brands to reach global markets and transform innovative ideas to commercialisation.⁶⁷

As the national export promotion agency under the National Trade Promotion Agency of Malaysia, **Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation (MATRADE)** is responsible for promoting the country's export by enabling local companies to create new global markets and elevating the profile of homegrown production and design by branding 'Made-In-Malaysia' as synonymous with excellence.⁶⁸

SME Corporation Malaysia (SME Corp. Malaysia) is the central coordinating agency (CCA) under the Ministry of Entrepreneur Development and Cooperatives (MEDAC) that coordinates the implementation of development programmes for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) across all related Ministries and agencies.⁶⁹

Investing in Design Power



Under the Ministry of International Trade and Industry, the **Malaysia Design Council (MRM)** is a strategic non-profit agency established in 1993 to promote the adoption of design and design thinking in business, education and governance. It aims to foster an environment where Malaysian made and designed products can compete with international peers.

- MRM organises the **Malaysia Good Design Awards (MGDA)** as the highest design recognition from the Malaysian Government which endorses products that bear quality in design manufacturing.
- It also operates the **Malaysia Design Library** with the largest collection of design materials in the country, including over 6,000 design books, journals, reports, magazines and other related materials.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ <https://ddec.my>

⁶⁸ <https://www.matrade.gov.my/en/about-matrade>

⁶⁹ <https://www.smecorp.gov.my/index.php/en>

⁷⁰ http://www.mrm.gov.my/dc_aboutus.asp

Digital Content Leader



Launched in 2021 in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, the ambitious Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint aims to catapult the country into 'a digitally-driven, high income nation and a regional leader in digital economy.'⁷¹ It has a dedicated sub-sectoral focus on art, entertainment and recreation which aims to:

- Enable virtual access to cultural products and services via high-resolution image technologies such as virtual reality and augmented reality
- Encourage the usage of digital technologies in amusement and recreation parks

- Nurture and upskill digital talent in the creative industries

Significantly, the Blueprint sets out to nurture and upskill digital talent for the creative industries to continue driving Malaysia as a regional hub for digital content, with the ambition of reaching:

- 200 IP creation in digital content by 2025
- 8% average annual growth rate of digital content export from 2021 to 2025
- Ascend to top 20 under the Knowledge and Technology pillar in the Global Innovation Index

Connectors and Conveners in Design – a sample

For education and upskilling, the industry heavily relies on the leadership of trade groups, higher education institutions and international agencies.

- Through Crafting Futures⁷² Malaysia – a British Council initiative – the **National Craft Institute of Malaysia** and the **Glasgow School of Art** in 2019 set up an experiential pop-up school with local designers, architects and creative practitioners to explore ways to nurture and engage a new generation in craft through creative learning.⁷³
- As one of the youngest design schools, **INTI Center of Art and Design (ICAD)** at INTI International College Subang is the country's first education member of the International Council of Design.⁷⁴ It offers a wide array of industry-relevant courses and specialised facilities.

Professional trade association also plays an important role in developing access to markets and nurturing knowledge exchange.

Malaysia Official Designer Association (MODA) – a non-for-profit trade association for the fashion industry, which aims to unite and empower Malaysian fashion to take a leading role in the local and global fashion economy. It has broadened its support to wider networks in the fashion industry – including retailers, lifestyle brands, learning institutions, communications firms, event producers, as well as creative industries professionals such as accessory designers, hair and make-up artists, stylists, photographers, fashion journalists, website designers, models, actors, textile fabricators, 3D printers, visual merchandisers and many more.⁷⁵

⁷¹ p.10, Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint, 2021.

⁷² <https://design.britishcouncil.org/projects/crafting-futures>

⁷³ <https://design.britishcouncil.org/blog/2019/feb/03/learning-about-innovation-winter-school-2019>

⁷⁴ <https://www.ico-d.org/2018/09/04/new-member-inti-center-of-art-and-design-icad-at-inti-international-college-subang.php>

⁷⁵ <https://moda.com.my>

Graphic Design Association of Malaysia (wREGA) – registered in 2001, is a key trade graphic and visual communication design association, aiming at raising standard and profile of the discipline through advocacy, networking, information sharing and education.⁷⁶

Pertubuhan Rekabentuk Bandar Malaysia (PEREKABANDAR) or the Malaysian Urban Design Association, operates a flagship interdisciplinary research lab, titled Media Lab, which hosts regular capacity building webinar that promotes urban design through media and technology. It also works to raise awareness on best practice with regard to public space and access and ethics on reclamation/regeneration and identity.⁷⁷

The **Malaysian Institute of Interior Designers** (MIID) or Pertubuhan Perekabentuk Dalaman (PPDM) is the national institute representing the interior design profession in Malaysia.⁷⁸

- MIID is the organiser of the annual REKA Conference, REKA Interior Exhibition (RIX) and REKE Awards.
- Its programme in recent years has shifted in emphasis to become youth-centric with a goal to nurture the next generation talents.⁷⁹
- MIID functions as an important platform for continuous learning by sharing best professional practice and industry trends. It also works with the statutory regulator Lembaga Arkitek Malaysia (LAM) and The Board of Architects Malaysia⁸⁰ to standardise and streamline best practices.

A community event by
HAUS KCH.

Photo © HAUS KCH

⁷⁶ <http://www.wrega.org>

⁷⁷ <https://www.perekabandar.org.my>

⁷⁸ MIID is the amalgamation of two previous bodies – Interior Designers Institute of Malaysia ((Institut Perekabentuk Dalaman Malaysia or IPDM) and the Malaysian Society of Interior Designers (MSID). <https://miid.org.my>

⁷⁹ <https://focusmalaysia.my/opinion/elevating-the-malaysian-interior-design-industry>

⁸⁰ Lembaga Arkitek Malaysia (LAM) or The Board of Architects Malaysia is one of the main statutory authority that approves the registration and professional examination of architects, graduate architects, interior designer and building draughtsmen.



4 Design Hubs: a sample

Makerspace KakiDIY, operating with two branches – the MCMC myMaker IOT Lab (located within the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission in Cyberjaya), and KakiDIY @ The Garage KL – provides a set of hands-on learning and DIY creation through digital tools such as 3D printing, robotics and coding.

Former factory **Kilang Bateri** in Johor Bahru was regenerated into a shopping mall and a mixed-use cultural attraction.

Founded in 2016, **Zhongshan Building** is composed of a series of 1950s shoplots in a quiet commercial enclave of Kampung Attap, near central Kuala Lumpur. It accommodates a range of creative businesses including, OUR ArtProjects gallery, a record store, design archive, library and more.

Me.reka is an entrepreneur collective that brings together industry professionals, academic leaders and creative entrepreneurs.⁸¹

Kota-K (Sabah) was founded by artist Yee I-Lann, architectural designers Phyllis Chin and Nurfilzah Jam. This space aims to foster multidisciplinary conversations within the arts in Sabah, by hosting talks, portfolio reviews, traditional craft workshops and other community events such as 'Tapai' rice wine-making. Its programme is designed to promote and preserve traditional Sabahan culture, while also bringing new disciplines into the conversation.

GMBB is a creative community mall situated at the heart of Kuala Lumpur's main commercial and cultural district of Bukit Bintang. It is a mall that connects creative talent with artisanal and independent retail products, combining retail offerings with innovative exhibitions.⁸²

Borneo Laboratory (Think & Tink) is Kuching based multidisciplinary space for the experimentation of Borneo Aesthetics – an aesthetic that emphasises collaboration with people of diverse backgrounds, disciplines and open dialogue.⁸³

For further information on design collectives, creative hubs and makerspaces, see the Creative Hub Malaysia website: <https://creativehubs.my>.

Network of Creative Entrepreneurs



HAUS KCH (Sarawak) is a community-centred collective that revitalises run-down spaces. Its name is an acronym for 'harmonise, accelerate, unite and sustain'.

HAUS organises workshops, events and programmes through its HAUSmates, which include a network of like-minded community art organisations in Kuching, to provide printing and design services, youth empowerment, creative entrepreneurship and a pipeline of local artists.⁸⁴

During the early outbreak of the pandemic, HAUS rallied local creatives and young talents to produce face shields for frontline workers.⁸⁵

HAUS KCH have recently launched the K[otak]ku Virtual Art Residency, as a project awarded under Cultural Economy Development Agency Visual Arts Showcase Funding Programme as well as a matching grant by Sarawak Digital Economy Corporation. This virtual residency programme aims to help the creative community continue practising during the pandemic and build up capacity for a sustainable career through good self-documentation practice.⁸⁶

⁸¹ <https://mereka.my>

⁸² <https://gmbb.com.my/about>

⁸³ <http://borneoartcollective.org/about-us>

⁸⁴ <https://www.hauskch.com/about>

⁸⁵ <https://aliran.com/thinking-allowed-online/sarawak-groups-rally-together-to-produce-face-masks-for-frontline-staff>

⁸⁶ <https://www.thestar.com.my/metro/metro-news/2021/01/14/out-of-box-idea-for-virtual-creativity>

Social Enterprises: a Growing Trend in Malaysian Design and Craft



Heritage-inspired lifestyle brand Senijari,⁸⁷ that promotes Malaysia craft was founded by the former banker/ lawyer turned creative **Suryani Senja Alias**. The design process of the homegrown luxe brand varies product by product with an aim to 're-interpret and revive Malaysian artisanal heritage through contemporary designs while working to uplift the often-underprivileged artisan community a social enterprise model that promotes fair and equitable partnerships and collaborations. Suriyani also operates her contemporary art gallery, Cult Gallery.⁸⁸ The

company blog serves as a window that introduces traditional crafts and underrepresented communities/cities.

The brand works regularly with Sarawak-based social enterprise Tanoti, which works as their exclusive artisan provider on a variety of products. 'I like working with Tanoti because their weavers are treated well and paid proper salaries as well as other benefits,' Suryani Senja Alias remarked.⁸⁹

“

Our artisans earn so little even though they are doing something of very high value, in terms of craftsmanship. They are not able to sell their work (for a more reasonable price) because people do not place a lot of value on our craft. There was a socioeconomic reason for setting up Senijari as well. I wanted to create a more high-value market for our arts that would also trickle down to our artisans so that they can be proud of their craft as are artisans in other countries such as Thailand and Indonesia.

Suryani Senja Alias, Senijari⁹⁰

⁸⁷ <https://senijari.com>

⁸⁸ https://www.britishcouncil.ph/sites/default/files/making_futures_philippines_-_press_kit.pdf

⁸⁹ <https://www.optiontheedge.com/topic/style/senijari-heritage-inspired-lifestyle-brand-promotes-malaysian-crafts>

⁹⁰ <https://www.optiontheedge.com/topic/style/senijari-heritage-inspired-lifestyle-brand-promotes-malaysian-crafts>

5 Movers and Shakers in the Design Industry: a sample

Industry Stakeholders

Nani Kahar, architect and partner at labDNA. Kahar's urban architectural design practice is placemaking-focused and community-driven. She is on the Industry Advisory Panel of CENDANA. She also produces festivals and events.

Melinda Looi is a fashion designer known for her avant-garde and vintage style and president of Malaysia Official Designer Association (MODA). She claimed the title Designer of the Year three times – twice at the Malaysian International Fashion Awards Malaysian International Fashion Week and in 2009 at Mercedes Benz Stylo Fashion Awards.

Bernard Chandran, dubbed 'Malaysia's King of Fashion', is a favourite of local celebrities and Malaysian royalty, thanks to his design that frequently draws inspiration from the country's multicultural traditions with a spin of modernity. Chandran also dressed stars like British singer Estelle at the 51st Grammy Awards and Lady Gaga at the 2009 Brit Awards. He is known as the chief designer of the reality television show Project Runway Malaysia.

CEO and partner of M&C Saatchi, **Datin Sri Sharifah Menyalara Hussein**, is known as the granddaughter of Malaysia's first prime minister and a giant in media and advertising.⁹¹

Urban identity designer, **William Harald-Wong**, founding member of Graphic Design Association of Malaysia (wREGA) and the Founder and Chairman of The Design Alliance Asia⁹²

Lai Siew Hong is the President of the Malaysian Institute of Designers (MIID); Co-Founder and Chief Executive Designer of Malaysia-based interior design firm, Blu Water Studio.

Homegrown Designers and Creative Entrepreneurs

Fern Chua, designer and founder of her eponymous batik label FERN, is the winner of the Fashion Pitch 2013 by MyCreative Ventures in Malaysia. The label recently expanded to include an artisanal collection that promotes 'local-made' ethical bespoke lifestyle goods.⁹³

Creative entrepreneur **Luk Chee Chew** is the founder and CEO of digital creative agency Fusionwave. The company developed a product and brand titled, Dweey, which was acquired by toy production company Toy Minister and quickly developed into a successful collectible 'art toy' line that was nominated in the Best DIY Platform Toy category at the USA's Designer Toy Awards.

Paul+pris is a versatile sister duo that specialises in interior design often with bespoke furniture. Their works are featured in specialist magazines such as *Home and Décor* and *Commercial Concept*. Their project for DiGi Telecommunication's office was highly commended in the Office Interior Design category at the Asia Pacific International Property Awards.⁹⁴

Run by Kuala Lumpur-based Brazilian artist and designer Jurema Walendowsky Baker, **Jurema Creations** creates art objects from found natural materials and recycled tropical foliage including palm tree bark, coconut shells, bamboo and coconut tree bark. The works of the atelier was commissioned to create a series of palm tray centrepieces for banquet tables at the ninth Sultan of Selangor's coronation and are frequently featured in exhibitions such as at Malaysia's heritage trust Badan Warisan Malaysia.⁹⁵

⁹¹ <https://my.asiatatler.com/people/sharifah-menyalara-hussein>

⁹² <https://www.whwdesign.org/william-harald-wong>

⁹³ <https://www.fern.gallery>

⁹⁴ <https://paul-pris.com>

⁹⁵ <https://juremacreations.com>

Established in 2005 and based in Cyberjaya, **Eleena Jamil Architect** (EJA) has earned a reputation as one of Malaysia's leading architectural practices. In conjunction with Kuala Lumpur's title as the 2020 World Book Capital, the firm has designed a bamboo library within the grounds of Perdana Botanical Gardens as a wider initiative of micro-libraries across the city.⁹⁶ The firm received first place in the Rethinking The Future Awards 2020 with their sustainable and clever use of bamboo in environmentally-conscious housing to replace concrete, steels and bricks.⁹⁷

Architecture firm **Studio Bikin**⁹⁸ started in 2012 by Farah Azizan and Adela Askandar has quickly gained prominence as one of the most promising young architects. The duo made their name with the use of humble materials that age well in tropical climates. Their furniture arm Kedai Bikin⁹⁹, which works with local artisans and responsibly sourced products and materials from ASEAN peers, has also grown from a pop-up to a permanent outlet.

Introduction to Welding Workshop at Me.reka Makerspace.

Photo © Me.reka

⁹⁶ <https://ej-architect.com/portfolio/bamboo-mini-library-for-klwbc2020>

⁹⁷ <https://awards.re-thinkingthefuture.com/rtf-awards-2020-winners/bamboo-terrace-homes-eleena-jamil-architect>

⁹⁸ <https://www.studiobikin.com/index.php>

⁹⁹ <https://www.kedaibikin.com>





Chapter 3: Literature

In collaboration with Dr Ann Lee,
PhD Southeast Asia Studies (NUS)

1

Sector Profile

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Iconic plurilingualism...

Rachel Leow, academic

Malay, Chinese, Tamil, and English are the most widely spoken languages in the country (including many dialects). At least 80 different languages are spoken as first languages, and many Malaysians are able to speak up to four languages. An estimated total number of 137 languages are spoken in the country.

- Many Malaysians are often literate in more than one language.¹⁰⁰ Malaysia's 'iconic plurilingualism' is a phenomenon to witness.

This chapter focuses on Malaysia's contemporary literature, traversing its diversity, inclusive of Malay language literature, Indigenous/Native languages, Chinese, Tamil and English languages. Sign language and books in Braille can be found under the 'Inclusiveness in Literature' section (page 65).

The Malaysian Association of Book Publishers

(Independent source)

- In 2018, MABOPA's total annual revenue was approx. RM5.3 billion (£94.15 million).
- Formed in 1969, it has 185 members (includes printers that produce textbooks and advertising materials).
- University publishers are among the new members in 2019/2020, including Sunway University Press, University Malaysia Kelantan, University Utara Malaysia, and IIUM Press.
- Scholastic (Asia) also joined in 2019.

¹⁰⁰ p.18, Asmah Haji Omar, 2004. Asmah Haji Omar, Encyclopedia of Malaysia: Languages and Literature (Didier Millet, 2004)

'Literature' Within Malaysia's Creative Industries Landscape



The Department of Statistics states that in 2019, Malaysia's printed books, brochures, leaflets and similar printed matter comprised only 0.02% (RM84.1 million or £14.8 million) of the country's total exports. These statistics provide a sense of the official perspective of (commercial) literature. (See **Reference** for more detailed scope of publishing activities). However, the economic contribution of literature and publishing is likely to be far greater than this official estimate and there is a data gap in terms of the contribution of the sector to GDP. In Malaysia, different parts of the Creative Industries are described as 'Scopes'. Literature and publishing also sit within the following Scopes, which makes the calculation of

total economic contribution very complex:

- In Scope 1 (Multimedia): 'Publishing of books, periodicals and other publishing activities'. Although Scope 1 focuses mostly on motion picture, video and television programmes, which need scripts and screenplays.
- Scope 2 under 'Culture Art' includes 'Printing and service activities related to Printing' (not only books but also advertising media).
- Scope 3 under 'Culture Heritage' includes 'Documentation and information activities', 'Stock photos and libraries' and even 'Operation of museums'. These are all possible 'sites' for oral and written literature.

To facilitate a holistic understanding of the role and value of Malaysian literature, it is critical to understand the wider anthropological, cultural, social and political context.

The country has a wide range of oral and written traditions of literature that date back 3,000 to 4,000 years. Of the extraordinary diversity of languages spoken today, certain 'rules of thumb' apply that help clarify that diversity:

- Malaysia's literature in the national language, Malay, is supported by the government and public sector bodies.
- Other language literatures (described as 'vernacular' or 'sectional') are generally supported by their own respective communities and private sector initiatives. They are not officially recognised for Malaysian literature awards or laureate positions.¹⁰¹

Colonial Classics About Malaya



- Isabella Bird's *The Golden Chersonese* (1883) and Emily Innes' *The Chersonese with the Gilding Off* (1885) Both presents 19th century British Malaya viewpoints from different social circles.
- Henri Fauconnier's *Malaisie* (The Soul of Malaya) won the Prix Goncourt, France's highest literary award in 1931.
- *The Malayan Trilogy* by Anthony Burgess (Time for a Tiger, 1958), *The Enemy in the Blanket* (1958) and *Beds in the East* (1959) about an education officer during the twilight of colonial rule.

¹⁰¹ This has various impacts on the sector. (National statistics about literature in the Creative Industry largely refer to literature in the national language. Other independent representative sources, such as the Malaysian Association of Book Publishers, and the Malaysian Booksellers Association also provide important estimates.)



Literature in our country comes in different languages. Most of those who practise just one language think that particular language's literature is the best in the world!

M. Mahendran, writer

Figure 2 Regional landscape – Malaysian literature

Kuala Lumpur – the capital region has the most writers, publishers and the majority of the reading public.

Penang is one the country's principal market centres with a largely Malaysian Chinese population and governed by an opposition party. The Penang Tamil Writers Association (formerly North Malaya Tamil Writers Association) became a member of the national Federation of Tamil Writers Association in 1987. It recently had its Silver Jubilee featuring three senior writers, K Sonamuthu, K Kaliaperumal and M Dhurairaj.

Kota Kinabalu – capital of Sabah has an arsenal of new writers who continue to produce work. This includes Bentarakata, a group of like-minded young writers, artists and performers who operate online as their physical space is now closed.

Kuching – capital of Sarawak provides fertile ground for new writers to flourish. They can be found on Sarawak State Library, Pustaka's Youtube link, among others, including new titles for dyslexic children, Princess Hornbill, Leaf my Friend, and My Beautiful River by Mary Anne Vaz.

A plethora of modern literary traditions exist in national and vernacular languages since Independence in 1957. Critically-acclaimed Malaysian authors exist in many languages.

1967 – Key Year in Malaysia's Cultural Decolonisation



Following the decade after Independence from the British colonial government in 1957, a National Language Bill was passed in Parliament as required by the country's constitution.

This Bill rejects official language status for all languages other than Malay, and requires all official texts at state and federal levels to be solely in Malay.

- However, the final Bill outlines exceptional cases in which English can continue to be used in official capacities (mostly related to law).
- The Bill also allows for Malay translations of communications or documents from any other language community.¹⁰²

¹⁰² Leow, Rachel Taming Babel: Language in the Making of Malaysia (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

Linguistic Diversity

The national language (bahasa means language) is commonly known by two names in Malay, bearing various connotations in their usage.

- Bahasa Malaysia' (refers generally to the country, reflecting its national status by all citizens and speakers of the language, irrespective of their ethnicity)
- Bahasa Melayu' (more aligned with ethnicity, and historically accurate, reflecting its status as the great lingua franca of trade for centuries in the region, from Malacca to Madagascar)

As the country's national language, it is the main medium taught in national schools. Unlike the Indonesian example of a national language where Bahasa Indonesia is the only compulsory medium in all national schools, Malaysia's constitution also provides for 'vernacular' national schools. In these schools, the curriculum is taught in 'vernacular' or sectional languages of Mandarin, Tamil, Iban and Kadazandusun.

Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP: the National Language and Literature Board) is the government body that manages and upholds promotions and activities around Malay language and literature. The agency was formed in 1956 to oversee policy about Malay literature and issues relating to education. It also operates in Sabah and Sarawak (where the Borneo Literature Bureau had existed from the turn of the century). It aims:

- To develop and enrich the national language
- To develop literary talent, particularly in Malay
- To print, publish or promote publication in Malay (and other languages)
- To standardise spelling and pronunciation and devise appropriate new vocabulary in Malay

Censorship Nuances



Malaysia's Constitution guarantees freedom of expression, in line with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, caveats exist within the Constitution, and various laws have been used against writers, publishers, and distributors, particularly:

- Sedition Act 1948
- Universities and University Colleges Act 1971
- Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984
- Multimedia and Communications Act 1998

These have been described as having a 'chilling effect' on writers that often fall foul of the country's dual legal system of the former British colonial 'Penal code' and of Syariah law. Further information on censorship in Malaysia can be found in the online archive MY Art Memory Project, www.myartmemoryproject.com.

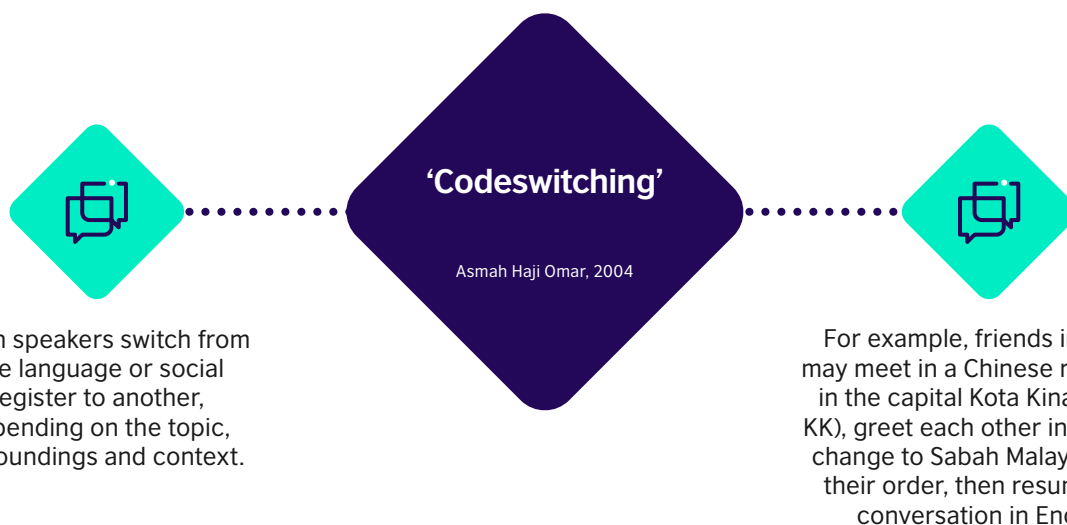


Figure 3 Language use in Malaysia¹⁰³

National language (an Austronesian language): Malay is spoken by the majority of Malaysia's population of 32 million	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One of the top 10 most widely-spoken languages in the world • Written Malay dates back at least 1,500 years (as with English) • Commonly considered to have developed with the advent of Islam • Arabic-based Jawi script, later Roman script, enabled Malay oral traditions to be written • Modern Malay literature develops in the 20th century • Many regional dialects of Malay spoken, depending on the state (13 states in Malaysia) for both oral/written literature • Bahasa Indonesia and Bahasa Malaysia/Melayu share similarities in use and spelling
Indigenous/Austroasiatic (Aslian) languages are the oldest surviving languages in Peninsular Malaysia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spoken by indigenous orang asli ('original people') • Between 10 to 15 variations
Other Indigenous/Austronesian languages also co-exist and are in use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kadazan and Dusun (languages of the main indigenous group, Kadazandusun, in the state of Sabah) though there is a wide range of diverse languages • Iban (language of the main indigenous group, the Iban, in the state of Sarawak) though there is also a wide range of languages in this state.
'Vernacular' or 'sectional' languages are spoken by ethnic groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chinese (including Mandarin, Hokkien, Hakka, Cantonese, among others). As at the turn of the 21st century, Chinese language speakers still form the second-largest speech group of the country's main languages. Hakka speakers and Tamil speakers make up similar numbers. • Indian (including Tamil, Hindi, Telugu, Malayalam, Punjabi, among others) • According to the 2000 census, speakers among ethnic groups include the population of Hokkien Chinese (1.5 million); Tamil (1 million+); Hakka Chinese (1 million+)
Creoles – another linguistic phenomenon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • According to unofficial accounts, creoles have up to 3,000 speakers. These include variations such as: Melaka Portuguese (Kristang); Baba Malay; Cocos Malay and Chavacano/Zamboangueno (Sabah); Kelantan Hokkien; Chitties of Melaka.

National Language – Malay Literature

Innovative contemporary Malay literature is published by a range of independent publishers. Covid-19 has had a hugely detrimental impact on smaller publication houses, but Buku Fixi remains one of the most prominent still in existence.

BUKU FIXI – 'Still standing'



Of the rise in independent contemporary Malay fiction publishers during the last decade, **Buku Fixi** is one of the few still publishing books. The books it publishes are regularly adapted for film and television. It has pioneered the use of crowdfunding to pay for publishing in advance.

- Annual revenue between RM1.5 million to 2.5 million (RM2 million, 2019)
- Imprints include Fixi Novo and Matahari Books in English

¹⁰³ Asmah Haji Omar Encyclopedia of Malaysia: Languages and Literature (Didier Millet, 2004) Asmah Haji Omar Encyclopedia of Malaysia: Languages and Literature (Didier Millet, 2004).



The art and culture of the Mah Meri are ‘closely interwoven by legend, ceremony, and strong belief in the efficacy of spirits. Especially interesting is their legend of creation.’

Roland Werner, 1986¹⁰⁴

Special Focus on Indigenous/Native Languages

Orang Asli Literature

The Orang Asli (original people in Malay) of Peninsular Malaysia speak some 14 languages with an emphasis on oral literature that has been studied prior and since Independence, particularly among the Semai, Temiar and Jakun people.

- Among the most well-known orang asli are the Mah-Meri of Carey Island, Selangor and the Jah-Het of Pahang.
- Among the aboriginal groups in Pahang, the Jah-Het have no written records, but their art, culture and daily life are expressed in wood carvings.

The **Department of Orang Asli**’s responsibility is to take care of the welfare of the Orang Asli. It has printed or funded publications relating to traditional oral literature and contemporary written literature of the orang asli.

Literature from Sabah

About 50 languages are spoken in Sabah, most are indigenous languages. Kadazandusun has the largest number of speakers, followed by Bajau, Murut, Malay, Paitanic, and other Austronesian languages. The Chinese language/dialect most spoken in Sabah is Hakka (Khet).

- The Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), Kadazan Dusun Cultural Association, Persatuan Seni Budaya Bajau (Bajau Cultural Society) publish cultural texts, dictionaries, and funded conferences. The Sabah Museum and the Sabah State Library have published folk tales, and house one of the largest selections of Kadazandusun literature.

Contemporary Urban Fiction



Writers and writers’ groups based in Kota Kinabalu, capital of the state of Sabah, include Bentarakata, Kota-K studio and Tamparuli Living Arts centre. Popular mystery thriller and short-story writer (full-time), Sahidzan Salleh, remains Sandakan-based.

¹⁰⁴ Werner, Roland. Bomoh-Poyang: Traditional medicine and ceremonial art of the Aborigines of Malaysia (UM Publications, 1986).

Literature from Sarawak

Iban is the first language for the highest number of Sarawakians, then Sarawak Malay (and Selakau), followed by Bidayuh (formerly Land Dayak), Melanau and Kajang. Speakers of Kelabit or Kelabit-Lundayeh come from eastern Sarawak and many reside in Miri.

- More than half of the total number of 30 – 40 languages spoken in Sarawak are indigenous languages (of the Austronesian family). Hokchiu (Foochow) and Hakka (Khek) are among the Chinese languages or dialects spoken.
- English is also spoken in urban areas. Sarawakians are mostly fluent in several languages although notices are often provided in several languages, namely Malay, English, Iban and Chinese.
- This is changing, however, as Sarawak Malay becomes more widely spoken. The State Library has been playing an important role to stimulate new writing, and initiated the Sarawak Authors Festival in 2018.

Iban – Oral and Written Literature



In 1878, the first Iban oral literature was published. Traditionally, Iban has an oral literature with no written form, except wooden tablets (papan turai), inscribed with symbols or pictures for shamans to remember what to do in rituals. Iban oral literary elements can also be seen in textiles such as pua kumbu (blanket wrap).

Contemporary fiction and poetry (highlight)

- Golda Mowe (of both Iban and Melanau heritage) writes fantasy fiction ‘steeped in Iban mythology’. See her trilogy, *Iban Dream*, *Iban Journey*, and *Iban Woman*.
- Sarawakian poet, Kulleh Grasi’s book of poems *Tell Me, Kenyalang* written in Malay and translated into English by Pauline Fan, was long-listed for the 2020 Best Translated Books Awards.

Borneo Literature Bureau (1958 – 1970s) was set up by the colonial government to encourage fiction and short stories in Iban. Annual prizes were awarded until Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka took over the Bureau’s activities in the 1970s.

Highlights¹⁰⁵

- 1961: Iban folk stories *Rita Tujoh Malam* by Anthony Richards (1,765 copies)
- 1962: 9 books published in Iban on geography and English, Iban custom (adat), and oral narratives including Benedict Sandin’s *Duabelas Bengkah Mimpi Tuai Dayak-Iban*, a collection of dreams by Iban chiefs ‘that had special historical significance’.
- 1963: (When Malaysia was formed) Books published in Iban: *Kumang Betelu*, a second saga (ensera) by H. Gerijih, and *Pelandok seduai Tekura*, an animal fable by D. Entingi. The Asia Foundation provided a grant for a full-time Iban officer, Edward Enggu.

¹⁰⁵ Postill, John R. ‘Borneo again: media, social life and nation-building among the Iban of Malaysian Borneo’ (PhD thesis, UCL, 1999).

Vernacular or Sectional Language/Literature

Chinese Language Literature (Mahua)

Mahua refers to Malaysian Chinese or Sino-Malaysian literature. The Chinese languages and dialects spoken and adapted in Malaysia are Mandarin (China's national language since 1924), Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka/Khet, Teochew, Hainanese, and Kwongsai, among others.

- Even before the 10th century, Chinese officials and Buddhist pilgrims were among the main visitors to the region but immigration on a much larger scale occurred during the late 19th and 20th centuries for tin mining, gambier and pepper plantations. Today's Mahua literature includes both domestic and diaspora writers.

Early Mahua

- First poem: *Yuanlai Xuesheng* (Oh, He's a School Student) by Xiao Ya in *Xin Guomin Zazhi* literature magazine (1920).
- First novel: *Nong Yan* (Dense Smoke) by Lin Cantian (1935).
- Teo Huat (Nian Hong) First short story in national newspaper *Nanyang Siang Pau* (1959), went on to write over 60 children's stories.
- Pan Yutong (pen name: Ling Zi) won literary awards in Taiwan (1981 and 1982).
- Ng Pek Hoon and Chong Siew Ling (2004).

Mahua – Malaysian Chinese Literature Publishers

Today, **Odonata Publishing**¹⁰⁶ is one of the largest Chinese-language publishers of children's books, literature and fiction. It focuses primarily on junior and teen readers. Incorporated in 1999, it now has over 20 employees. With annual sales around RM5 – RM10 million, it exports to the Chinese diaspora community in ASEAN and East Asia.

GotOne 有人出版社¹⁰⁷ publisher is a boutique publishing house that has published the works, among others, of Zhang Gui Xing 張貴興.

- In 2020, they published a novel about a blind girl's adventures, set in Xi Du (the tin town) or Ipoh, Malaysia. It was written by one of Malaysia's most popular and well-known authors, Li Zi Shu 黎紫書.
- In 2019, they published LGBTQ title *Hao Jiao Ju Qi/Raise the Trumpet* 號角舉起, A collection of 14 short stories by 14 writers about LGBT issues, and the lives of minorities and the disadvantaged in Malaysia.

Gerakbudaya Bookshop Penang

Photo © Gerakbudaya Bookshop Penang

¹⁰⁶ <https://www.odonata.com.my>

¹⁰⁷ <https://www.got1shop.com/brand.php?>



Indian/Dravidian Languages – Tamil

‘Malaysian Indian’ literature is a catch-all for the range of mostly Dravidian languages spoken in Malaysia – namely Tamil, Hindi, Telugu, and also Malayalam, Punjabi, among others. As archaeological sites demonstrate, ancient Hindu kingdoms existed in the Peninsular (or Isthmus).

- In addition, during the end of the 19th century, large numbers of workers were brought into Malaya from India by British colonial administrations as indentured labour, mostly for rubber plantations and later railways.

In 2019, the Malaysian Tamil Writers Association President, P Rajendran (Rajendran Perumal) was honoured with the Valar Tamizh Mamani award for ‘services to Malaysian Tamil literature’ by the Chennai-based Pannattu Tamil Mozhi Panpattu Kalvi Kazhagam (International Tamil language and Culture Education Association).

- This reflects how Malaysian Tamil writers have found support and endorsement from mainland India Tamil associations. Many Tamil-language writers write to connect primarily with Malaysian audiences.

Tamil Fiction



In 1888, Tamil short stories in Singapore (written by Cikgu Magadhum Saybu, editor of the weekly *Singai Nesa* (Singapore Admirer) were entitled ‘*Vinodhana Sambashanai*’ (Fascinating Conversations).¹⁰⁸

- Until 1945, local Tamil literature mainly oral, comprising ‘folk songs sung on the rubber estates where the majority of Tamils worked’
- In the 1990s, dominance of such ‘estate-themed’ literature began to wane as continuing urban migration saw Malaysian Indian plantation workers move to live in cities
- For the range and development in themes, see,

for example, N. A. Senguttuvan’s *Arai Nootraandu Malaysian Sirukadhaigal* 1950 – 2000 (Half a Century of Malaysian Short Stories, 1950 – 2000).

For **contemporary Tamil fiction**, Tamil language newspapers remain important support for Tamil fiction and poetry writers.

- M Mahendran, among others, writes in both Tamil and Malay of urban issues
- New women writers such as Perevenia Shanmuganathan and Anuradha Chelliah are also writing new fiction in Malay with urban themes.

Literature in English language

The literary tradition of Malaysian literature in English is commonly considered to have been established in the 1970s with ‘truly local themes’ appearing after WWII, focusing on the Japanese Occupation, the Emergency (suspension of Parliament, among other measures, to fight against Communists) and embryonic nationalism.¹⁰⁹ The Japanese Occupation theme has continued to find popularity among UK-based readers.

Both the most internationally-renowned Malaysian authors, Tash Aw and Tan Twan Eng, made their reputations with novels set in this time period.

A wide range of writers have gained regional and global recognition. Contemporary award-winning women writers include Bernice Chauly, Shih-Li Kow, Saras Manickam, Yang Sze Choo and Zen Cho, among others.

¹⁰⁸ P Balasubramaniam and P Rajendran ‘Tamil Fiction’ in Encyclopedia of Malaysia: Languages and Literature (Didier Millet, 2004).

¹⁰⁹ Wong, 2004, P. 116.

- **Tash Aw's** first novel, *The Harmony Silk Factory* (2005), won the 2005 Whitbread First Novel Award, and the Commonwealth Writers Prize (South East Asia and South Pacific Region Best First Book). His subsequent novels are *Map of the Invisible World* (2009), set in Indonesia and Malaysia in the mid-1960s, and *Five Star Billionaire* (2013). In 2019 he published *We, the Survivors*, with Fourth Estate. His work of short fiction *Sail* won the O. Henry Prize in 2013.
- **Tan Twan Eng's** first novel, *The Gift of Rain* was published in 2007 by Myrmidon Books (UK) and the following year by Weinstein Books in the US. It was longlisted for the Man Booker Prize that year. *The Garden of Evening Mists* was his second novel, first published in January 2012. It was also shortlisted for the Booker Prize, but awarded the Man Asian Literary Prize and the Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction. The film adaptation was released in 2019.
- **Preeta Samarasan's** first novel, *Evening Is the Whole Day*, won the Hopwood Novel Award (2009). It was also finalist for the Commonwealth Writers Prize 2009, and on the longlist for the Orange Prize for Fiction.

English Language Publishers



Expanding to Southeast Asia in 2019, **Penguin Random-House, Southeast Asia**¹¹⁰ has set up its office in neighbouring Singapore. It now has editors based around Singapore and in India. Among the publishing house's first 50 titles from Southeast Asia in English slated to be released soon, it has a number of new works by Malaysian authors.

Silverfish, owned by former civil engineer Raman Krishnan, was instrumental in supporting new fiction in English during the 1990s. It has also re-printed early books on Malaysia by colonial and pre-Independence writers. See for example, *Bunga Emas: An Anthology of Contemporary Malaysian Literature* (1930 – 1963), edited by T Wignesan.

Maya Press is an imprint established in 2002 and wholly-owned by Sasbadi Holdings¹¹¹ which publishes educational textbooks and books, plus young adult books, as its main business. Maya Press has published fiction, plays and poetry by renowned Malaysian writers, mostly from the 1970s and 1980s including K.S. Maniam, Latif Mohidin, Lee Kok Liang, Lloyd Fernando, Salleh Ben Joned, Shirley Geok-Lim and Wong Pui Nam. Annual sales are less than RM5 million.

Buku Fixi is run by Amir Muhammad, an author and filmmaker. It remains one of the few independent publishers still publishing contemporary urban Malay and English fiction. It's reported that having noticed that in 2011, nine out of 10 nominees in a Malay language writing competition were romance works, Amir placed an open call for new story submissions on Facebook. Buku Fixi has since regularly published new manuscripts and in 2015 opened its first bookstore. The publishing group includes imprints Fixi Novo and Matahari Books for English language books, and Fixi Retro (for out-of-print Malay novels).

Gerakbudaya was founded in 2000 by former political detainee, Chong Son Tin (fondly known as 'Pak Chong'). Gerakbudaya is a publisher and distributor of mostly non-fiction books, with two bookstores, that 'embody social awareness, critical and alternative perspectives, and the hidden histories of Malaysia, Southeast Asia and the wider world'. Its academic imprint – Strategic Information and Research Development Centre (SIRD) – is committed to publishing 'original and thought-provoking books that produce a critical awareness of Malaysian politics, history, culture and society'. Gerakbudaya is also part of a network of alternative publishers that presented a series of talks at the George Town Literary festival 2020.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ <https://penguin.sg>

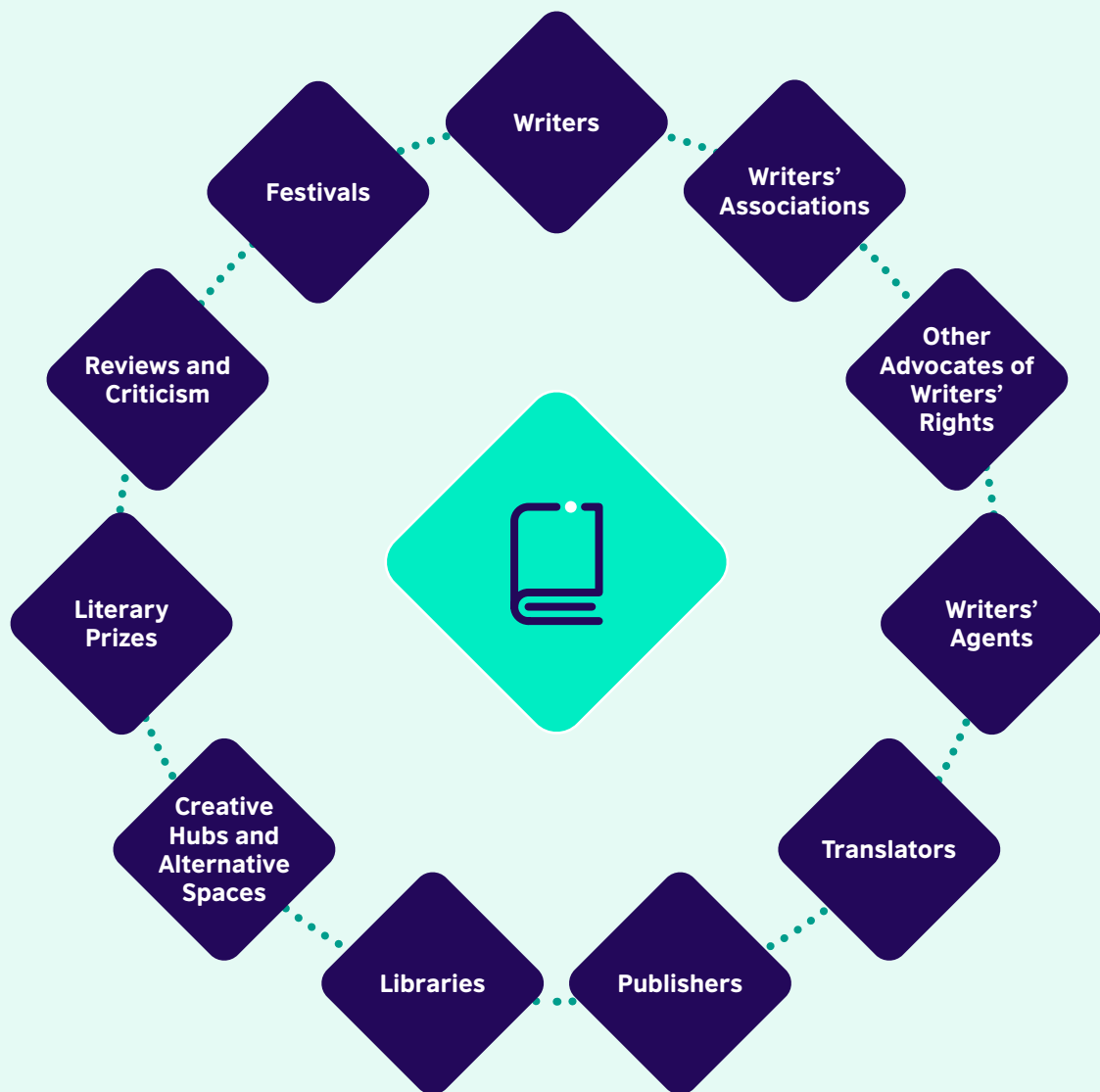
¹¹¹ <http://www.sasbadi.com>

¹¹² <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1fkS3Mg9ZSGxN-ZspM89YeNtx8qicLfqp/view>

2 The Literature and Publishing Ecosystem of Malaysia

The ecosystem of Malaysian literature comprises writers, writers' associations and agents, state and independent publishers, translators, libraries, readers, media and reviewers.

Figure 4 Ecosystem – Literature in Malaysia



Writers

- Writers, poets, and playwrights, who write narrative fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and drama can find support from writers associations.
- Few writers, unless in the national language, are full-time. The relatively few full-time writers work in a variety of genres and media 'moving back and forth between journalism, essays, short fiction, blogging and indeed film'.¹¹³

Writers' Associations

Some of the national and state writers associations that support and advocate for writers are more active than others. These include:

- Gabungan Persatuan Penulis Nasional Malaysia/ Federation of National Union of Writers of Malaysia (GAPENA)
- Persatuan Penulis Nasional Malaysia (PENA)
- Persatuan Penulis Malaysia (claims over 7,000 members, mostly bloggers)
- Malaysian Chinese Writers Association (since 1978), about 350 members (2004)
- Malaysian Tamil Writers Association
- Penang Writers Association

Other Advocates of Writers' Rights – Freedom of Expression

- The 'Freedom of Expression Cluster' (this includes the Centre for Independent Journalism or CIJ, Article 19, and other NGOS representing labour and women's groups).
- ReformARTsi (a loose coalition of over 100 member arts groups and individuals including writers); has three subcommittees including one focused on 'Freedom of Expression'.
- PEN Malaysia (founded in 2019, currently about 100 members), an affiliate of PEN International, the registered charity based in London.

Writers' Agents

Although several agencies have existed to help writers, such as the Yusof Gajah Lingard Literary Agency, the Covid-19 pandemic has reduced their ability to do business and stay afloat. The post-pandemic scene will reveal the extent to which an active agents' scene remains viable in Malaysia.

“

While (Malaysian cartoonist) Lat can be translated into Spanish by ITBM [National Translation and Malaysian Books Centre], the work of (Malaysian author) Tash Aw cannot be translated into the national language because it is not foreign enough, not local enough.

Amir Muhammad, writer, publisher and filmmaker

¹¹³ Patke and Holden, 2010, 151.

Translators

Given the diversity of languages, translation provides an essential conduit for Malaysians to hear one another speak, and for the world to read Malaysian literature.

- Incorporated in 1993, the Institut Terjemahan & Buku Malaysia Bhd (ITBM: National Translation and Malaysian Books Centre)¹¹⁴ is the state-funded translation body for translation in the national language, Malay, or for works in Malay to other languages.
- It is mostly focused on business and commerce, with annual sales reaching RM10 – RM15 million and 150 employees.
- Due to the special nature of emphasis on the national language, certain dichotomies can arise. As Amir Muhammad, author, filmmaker and independent publisher states, books by the country's best loved cartoonist, Lat, are available in other languages, thanks to the support of ITBM. However, for Malaysian authors who do not write in Malay, such as renowned Malaysian author, Tash Aw, his work cannot be translated because they are 'not foreign enough, not local enough'.

Publishers

The largest Malaysian publishers produce text books for schools, and fiction for young readers. Several are state funded or state-owned, in part or in total.

- Literary publishers in the national language are led by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (the National Language and Literature Board) that publishes fiction, magazines and journals.
- A vibrant but small independent sector of national language publishers produce contemporary fiction in Malay.
- Publishers in other languages are located in the private sector but only a small number of boutique publishers also export to the region, China, India, as well as the UK, US and Australia and New Zealand.

Innovative publisher



Inisiatif Buku Darul Ehsan is an innovative publisher that provides original and translated contemporary Malaysian fiction, world fiction and classics in the national language. It has published 'world literature' of fiction and non-fiction titles into Malay. It has also published selected short stories in Malay into Chinese and vice versa.

- Titles include *Diari Seorang Gadis* (*Diary of Anne Frank*); *Jagat Kehidupan Dan Pemikiran* (*Einstein: His Life and Universe* by Walter Isaacson) translated by Al-Mustaqeem M. Radhi, Ashraf Khalid, Syed Omar Husain, Jabbar Salleh, Zahed M. Naser, Maisarah Atan; Plato's *Republic* (*Republik*, translated by Khairul Anam Che Mentri) and Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* (*Jalan Berliku Menuju Kebebasan* by Alina Abdullah).

Rumah Attap Library & Collective at The Zhongshan Building.

Photo © All Is Amazing

¹¹⁴ <http://www.itbm.com.my>



Sample Publishers/Members of the Malaysia Association of Book Publishers¹¹⁵



Oxford Fajar¹¹⁶, founded in 1957, is a subsidiary of Oxford University Press. It publishes about 300 titles a year in all main languages (Malay, English, Chinese and Tamil) for different market sectors ranging from preschool to tertiary. Its annual sales total about RM30 – RM40 million.

- Its educational books for schools and colleges, includes: dictionaries; academic and trade titles; atlases; guidebooks covering major public examinations; English Language Teaching (ELT) books; teaching aids; college and teacher training texts, etc.
- It also markets and distributes Oxford titles, imported from the UK and the USA.

PTS Media Group¹¹⁷ was founded in 2000 and is the publisher of Harry Potter books in Malay. Its annual sales totals about RM30 – RM40 million. It publishes books in English and Malay covering the areas of academic & education; children's book, E-book and digital content; general/trade; literature and fiction; religion; professional.

Incorporated in 1982, **Penerbitan Pelangi**¹¹⁸ is the winner of Anugerah Buku Negara (National Book Award). It makes an average of RM30 – RM40 million annual sales with over 200 employees.

Other contemporary fiction and non-fiction publishers that are highlighted in this chapter include **Buku Fixi/Matahari**, **Gerakbudaya**, **Silverfish**, and **Buku Iniatif Darul Ehsan** (Malay/English), and **OneGo** publishers (Chinese), which are highlighted in the relevant language sections.

Libraries

The National Library (Perpustakaan Negara) provides access to books in national and vernacular languages, and heads a network of fixed and mobile libraries across the country.

- In a new departure, the National Library recently sponsored a short story contest, allowing submissions in four languages.

Creative Hubs and Alternative Spaces

- **Readings** is a monthly get together of readings, mainly in English, set up by Bernice Chauly and run by creative writing and language teacher, Sharon Bakar.
- **Rumah Attap**, located in the creative hub of Zhongshan Buidling, provides access to pre-loved books and journals for reading and study.
- **Imagined Malaysia** is a university-led group of young scholars and others interested to explore counter narratives of official histories.
- For more hubs that have a focus on literature, publication and online content, see the Creative Hub Malaysia website: https://creativehubs.my/hub_category/literature.

¹¹⁵ MABOPA Annual Meeting Report/Mesyuarat Agung Tahunan ke 51 (MABOPA, 2020; also 2016).

¹¹⁶ <http://www.oxfordfajar.com.my>

¹¹⁷ <http://www.pts.com.my>

¹¹⁸ <http://www.pelangibooks.com>

Literary Prizes in Malaysia

- **Anugerah Sastra:** National Literary Awards is organised by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP), the government body responsible for coordinating the use of the Malay language and Malay-language literature in Malaysia. The National Literary Awards is open to any publication in the national language; Since inauguration, these annual awards have gone to writers of Malay ethnicity (none to so-called 'non-Malay' writers).
- **Hua Zong Awards** is supported by Chinese-language newspaper *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, biennially for Reporting, Literature, Novels, Prose, Poems and Children's Literature. Since inauguration, these annual awards have gone to writers of Chinese ethnicity.
- **Boh Cameronian Arts Awards** including 'Best Original Script' available in various languages. These awards have been suspended for the time being due to Covid-19.
- **The Prime Minister's Literary Awards** (originally called the Tun Razak Literature Awards; included Malay translation of Chinese short stories by Teo Huat (Nian Hong), the first Chinese writer to receive (1971); Kazhagam (International Tamil language and Culture Education Association); Anbanandan Literature Award (Tamil) won by *Thee Malar* (Fire Flower) by Su. Kamala.

Reviews and Criticism

Newspapers and media continue to play an important role in providing reviews, serialised/new writing, and conversations about new fiction, non-fiction and poetry. Malaysia has many mainstream media titles in different languages, both off-line and hard copy. Among the most widely read are:

- Utusan Malaysia, Berita Harian (in Malay)
- The New Straits Times, the Star (English)
- Sin Chew Jit Poh (Chinese)
- Malaysia Nanban, Makkal Osai (Tamil).

Specialist Online Platforms



ArtsEquator¹¹⁹ is a digital media platform which covers arts and culture in Southeast Asia. It has a focus on Malaysia's wider literary scene and arts in general.

Eksentrika¹²⁰ is an arts and culture community to get inspired, find and collaborate with artists based in Malaysia and Asia, discover events, and submit short stories and poems.

BFM: the Business Station is a Malaysian independent radio station. It has a weekly programme about books and has an online presence as well as podcasts that focus on arts and culture – where literature is also an element.

- For example, '*Children's Books Today*', features Dr Sharifah Aishah Osman, Senior Lecturer, Department of English, Faculty of Art and Social Sciences, Universiti of Malaya, and Daphne Lee, Children and Young Adults Books editor.¹²¹
- '*Front Row*' highlights the current affairs and topical debates in the cultural sector. On the special report of Global Migrant Festival 2020, writer Warsan Weedhsan and Sugiarti, poet and playwright were invited as special guests.¹²²

¹¹⁹ <http://www.artsequator.com>

¹²⁰ <https://eksentrika.com>

¹²¹ <https://www.bfm.my/podcast/evening-edition/by-the-book/by-the-book-childrens-books-today>

¹²² <https://www.bfm.my/podcast/the-bigger-picture/front-row/global-migrant-festival-2020>

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George Town Literary Festival stands out as a vibrant, diverse and brave festival that engages with a wide community of voices, speaking to the world from a complex region.

Judges, Literary Festival Award at the London Book Fair, 2018

Festivals

- The **George Town Literary Festival (GTLF)** is the premier festival of literature in Malaysia. It was founded in 2011 with writer, poet and educator, Bernice Chauly as inaugural festival director. (Translator, Pauline Fan and broadcaster, Sharaad Kuttan have been serving as new festival co-directors since 2020). GTLF features on average approximately 30 writers from 15 countries and has won the Literary Festival Award at the London Book Fair 2018 as the first Southeast Asian festival to win.
- **‘Cooler Lumpur – Festival of Ideas’** (a pun on ‘Kuala Lumpur’, the capital city) provides alternative talks and workshops by prominent and upcoming writers and thinkers.
- The 3-day event, **Sarawak Authors Festival** (initiated by the Sarawak State Library in 2018) features presentations and readings by authors and aims to promote and foster new Sarawakian Malay writing among book authors. It seeks to preserve literary heritage and provide access to local authors and local publications to global audience.
- **Malaysia** not only shares a border but ethnic diversity and demographic composition with Singapore. The annual regional highlight of the **Singapore Writer Festival** organised by the National Arts Council (NAC) Singapore becomes a stage where Malaysian writers are invited to speaking opportunities and for award recognitions. Such as in the case of Malaysian novelist Hanna Alkaf, whose *The Weight of Our Sky* was selected to be featured in the inaugural Singapore Writers Festival’s Youth Fringe.

George Town
Literary Festival 2019

Photo © George Town Literary Festival



3 Movers and Shakers in the Literature Sphere (selected)

Writers

Amir Muhammad is a dedicated author, publisher and film-maker who crosses boundaries with aplomb; responsible for generating new work and establishing reputations. He heads Buku Fix (in Malay) with imprints Fixi Novo and Matahari Books (in English).

Sharon Bakar is a creative writing and English language teacher whose work goes well beyond the classroom.

Chiew Ruoh Peng is a Chinese-language writer fluent in languages that include poetry and performance.

Li Zi Shu 黎紫書 is a popular Malaysian Chinese novelist whose stories set in Malaysia find widespread appeal in Taiwan and China. Her most recent novel, about a blind girl's adventures, set in Xi Du (the tin town) or Ipoh, Malaysia was published by GotOne Publishers in 2020.

Perumal Murugan is an award-winning Malaysian Tamil writer and currently a Vice President of PEN International, the 100 year-old literary association that promotes literature and protects freedom of expression. (Other current Vice Presidents include Margaret Atwood, Sook-Hee Chun, J M Coetzee, and Orhan Pamuk).

Uthaya Sankar SB is an award-winning writer and 'enfant terrible' whose short stories and novels in the national language, Malay, experiment with form and content. He also publishes new work (Gemilang) and holds writing workshops.

Renee Pillai, is the first Malaysian screenwriter to win the prestigious Oscar-governed grant, the Academy Nicholl Fellowships in Screenwriting in 2019.¹²³ Her film script *Boy With Kite* defeated 7,000 other entries.¹²⁴

Publishers, Sales and Bookstores

Founded in 2000 by former Internal Security Act detainee, Chong Son Tin (fondly known as 'Pak Chong'), **Gerakbudaya**¹²⁵ is a publisher and distributor of books, with two bookstores, that 'embody social awareness, critical and alternative perspectives, and the hidden histories of Malaysia, Southeast Asia and the wider world'. Its academic imprint – Strategic Information and Research Development Centre (SIRD) – is committed to publishing 'original and thought-provoking books that produce a critical awareness of Malaysian politics, history, culture and society'.

Inisiatif Buku Darul Ehsan¹²⁶ is a young publishing company that has already produced the most diverse range of world literature, classics, and bestsellers in the national language, Malay.

As a book fair and advocacy event, the **Big Bad Wolf** annual book sale was set up by a husband-and-wife team that also founded **Books Xcess**; their commitment to innovative retail spaces is to ensure that the widest range of contemporary literature in English is affordable. The initiative began in Malaysia and now has become a global effort that promotes reading and literature. It has toured across cities in Thailand, Taiwan, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Myanmar,

¹²³ <https://www.therakyatpost.com/2020/02/06/meet-the-first-malaysian-screenwriter-to-ever-win-a-prestigious-oscar-governed-grant>

¹²⁴ <https://www.thestar.com.my/lifestyle/entertainment/2020/02/04/this-malaysian-screen-writer-won-an-oscar-governed-grant-beating-over-7000-other-scripts>

¹²⁵ <http://www.gerakbudaya.com>

¹²⁶ <https://www.ilhambooks.com/penerbit/inisiatif-buku-darul-ehsan>

South Korea, the Philippines, and United Arab Emirates.

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We needed to organise something bigger and that was when we came up with the idea of the Big Bad Wolf Book Sale in 2009. We believe it's not just about selling books, but we are an organisation that advocates reading and we hope to spread the reading habit to people around the world, especially where purchasing a book is a luxury.

Jacqueline Ng, co-founder of BookXcess book stores and Big Bad Wolf Books¹²⁷

Cooler Lumpur Festival 2014

Photo © Bryan Chang | Cooler Lumpur

¹²⁷ <https://www.malaymail.com/news/life/2019/12/10/changing-the-world-one-book-at-a-time-how-big-bad-wolf-books-made-reading-m/1817731>



'Post Covid-19': Accelerating Digital



Originally Methodist Publishing House founded in 1890, then Malaysia Publishing House, '**MPH**' was Malaysia's no. 1 and oldest book retailer chain, with over 30 bookstores nationwide. In June 2020, the company announced the closure of many stores but a new move to an 'e-commerce cum digitalised ecosystem'.¹²⁸

The new online shopping portal, **Shopee** has become a leading retailer of books.

BookXcess, co-founded by Jacqueline Ng and Andrew Yap, is a retail brand with physical stores but its flagship annual sale known as Big Bad Wolf

has attracted an unprecedented 3 million-plus visitors worldwide.

Eksentrika has become a platform for new short fiction in Malay and English.

Young Adult and Children's author, **Heidi Shamsuddin**, now has a YouTube channel based on Nusantara or Southeast Asian fairy tales.¹²⁹

New platforms such as social media and online self-publishing tools have enabled writers as independent publisher. This has facilitated creators to circumvent traditional gate-keepers and reach the market/readers directly.

“

There are many more platforms for writers these days... they can use Instagram to be Instapoets, Wattpad to serialise their books... The old-fashioned notion that it is up to publishers to be gatekeepers, enablers and permission-givers is outdated.

Amir Muhammad, writer, publisher and filmmaker¹³⁰

¹²⁸ Moey, 2020.

¹²⁹ <http://youtu.be/NivCij7QT68>

¹³⁰ <https://theprimadonnalife.com/the-prima-donnas/the-independent-publisher>

Inclusiveness in Literature

In 1985, Bahasa Kod Tangan (BMKT) or Malaysian Sign Language in Malay was officially introduced in schools for the hearing impaired.

- **Braille Books**¹³¹ and audio books (recorded mostly in Malay and English) are available at the Malaysian Association for the Blind (MAB) or Persatuan Bagi Orang Buta Malaysia, founded in 1951.

‘Walls’ – Poem Film

‘Walls’ is a poem film in Bahasa Isyarat Malaysia (BIM) by Anthony Chong, translated in English by multimedia poet, Sheena Baharudin.¹³²

It is a result of a year-long online collaboration between Malaysian artists and UK artist educator, Elaine Foster during Covid-19.

The team also developed a potential teaching methodology for using poetry and other creative signing literary forms to support the education of d/Deaf people in Malaysia. Originally a mobility grant, the launch of the poem film was hosted by the School of English at the University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus, MY Poetry School, and supported by British Council SEA/Malaysia.



**When I was born; Mama connected
the dots; from my ear to my mouth;
And proceeded to draw; The first
four lines: A cradle for her child;
I remember how she scribbled
warmth; On my tiny clenched fists;
How her kisses graffiti-ed;
Love on my cheeks;
Here You’ll be ok; Here You’ll be safe.**

Excerpt from Walls, a poem film in Bahasa Isyarat Malaysia

¹³¹ www.mab.org.my

¹³² To see the poem film: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CQniEC19VNU> and https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=832667570618408

4 Recognition and Opportunities

UNESCO Titles

Kuala Lumpur was awarded as the UNESCO World Book Capital in 2020. This was awarded by the Director-General of UNESCO, Audrey Azoulay, as recommended by the World Book Capital Advisory Committee comprising representatives from the International Publisher's Association (IPA), the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) and UNESCO. The city was selected thanks to its strong focus on inclusive education and dedicated development of a knowledge-based society, on top of its efforts in making reading accessible for all parts of the city's population. Highlight events and activities around the KL UNESCO World Book Capital 2020 included:

- Construction of a book city (the Kota Buku Complex)
- A reading campaign for train commuters
- Enhancing of digital services and accessibility for the disabled at the National Library
- New digital services for 12 libraries in poor housing areas

Due to Covid-19, this event had to be cancelled with a few events transferred online. The Ministry of Education channelled funds instead to smaller contests for participants at home, as well as a short film contest.

International Collaboration Opportunities

Translation

There is a significant opportunity for collaboration in the translation of the literatures produced within the country for both Malaysian and global readers.

- **Winner of English PEN Award:** *Lake Like A Mirror: Stories* by writer, Ho Sok Fong, published by GRANTA (2019). 'A breathtaking collection that explores the lives of Malaysian women: immigrants,

Cultural Heritage Assets



Sulalatus al-Salatin popularly known as *Sejarah Melayu* (the *Malay Annals*) may have been first recorded during the Melaka Period (1401 – 1511). It is also said to have been rewritten in 1536 and revised in 1612. Some of this work was expanded in the landmark *Hikayat Hang Tuah*. Both works have been nominated as world heritage items under UNESCO's 'Memory of the World' programme.¹³³

- Penguin-Random House Southeast Asia has published a new edition of this (under its 'Southeast Asian Classics' series) entitled '*The Genealogy of Kings*' by Tun Sri Lanang translated by (Prof) Haji Muhammad Salleh.

rebels, lost souls, pragmatists, dreamers'. Originally published in Chinese by Aquarius Publishing, Taiwan (2014). Translated by Natascha Bruce, the book was funded by English PEN and supported by the Arts Council, England.

- **Comma Press'** innovative creative fiction series for travellers '*Book of...*' has seen the Book of Jakarta, among others, published with the support of the British Council.

¹³³ Asmah Haji Omar, 2004.

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There's a real opportunity for meaningful cultural exchange through translated works, but a dire lack of funding for literary translation. We need (1) 'inter' translation of our own languages within the country (2) more translation of 'world literature' into Malay and other Malaysian languages and (3) translation of Malaysian language literatures into English and other world languages.

Pauline Fan, Co-Director of the George Town Literary Festival, Translator

Adaptation for Film and Television

Original and translated works have been used for film and television. Malaysia has a burgeoning digital and audiovisual sector (see Chapter 5). This provides scope for adapting Malaysian and international literature into TV, film and animation. The combination of diverse and innovative story-tellers and excellent creative and digital facilities and skills could position Malaysia as a leading centre for screen and digital story-telling.

- Tan Twan Eng's adaptation of his own novel, *The Gift of Rain*, was produced by Astro Shaw and HBO Asia. It won Best Feature Film at the Asian Academy Creative Awards (2020)
- Several of **BUKU FIXI**'s books have been adapted for film. Sister company, Kuman Pictures has produced *ROH*, Malaysia's submission for the Oscars 'Best Foreign Film' category (2020).¹³⁴ *Gantung*, a popular horror book became an 8-part miniseries broadcast in Malaysia and Indonesia.

¹³⁴ <https://variety.com/2020/film/asia/malaysia-sends-art-house-horror-film-soul-roh-to-oscars-1234823027>



Chapter 4:

Film/TV/Audiovisual

With thanks to Amir Muhammad
for comments and input

1

Sector profile

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The Malaysian film industry has grown substantially since the nation's early pre-independence days. Government initiatives and policies have helped, to a large degree, with the industry's output registering encouraging figures in recent years.

Lee and Ruth, 2019, p.224¹³⁵

Malaysia has a robust film, broadcast and digital content industry and a long legacy that produces for a culturally diverse market, with significant government subsidy.^{136 137}

In recent years, the country has developed as a hub for post-production and is a major global player in digital animation. For international companies, the talent and infrastructure in this sphere, coupled with the financial incentives for co-production, present **the major opportunity** for collaboration with this fast-changing digital creative economy.

Malaysia's domestic box office has long been dominated by Hollywood, Bollywood and ethnic Chinese imports, due to the Government supporting a broadly 'open market' policy with limited quotas on foreign films.¹³⁸ However, the market share of locally-produced content is on the increase, and appetite for 'Made in Malaysia' film and TV is showing signs of growth (see below section on domestic market growth).

¹³⁵ Lee, Y. H. and Ruth L. S. Y. (2019) Accessing Malaysia's Creative Industry: Progress and Policies in the Case of the Film Industry. *Creative Studies*. Vol. 12, Issue 2., pp. 224 – 245.

¹³⁶ Barker, T. and Lee, Y. B., Making Creative Industries Policy: the Malaysian Case, *Kajian Malaysia*, vol. 35, no. 2 (2017) [http://web.usm.my/km/35\(2\)2017/km35022017_2.pdf](http://web.usm.my/km/35(2)2017/km35022017_2.pdf)

¹³⁷ Hasrul Hisham, T. The Impact of Globalization on the Malaysia Film Industry. *International Journal of Innovative Technology and Exploring Engineering (IJTEE)*. Vol. 8, Issue 7S2 (May 2019) <https://www.ijitee.org/wp-content/uploads/papers/v8i7s2/G10230587S219.pdf>

¹³⁸ Lee and Ruth, 2019.

Malaysia's roster of locally-produced independent films and regionally co-produced commercial movies has gained profile and prominence at film festivals worldwide, including independent festival Sundance Film Festival, commercial festivals like Busan Film Fest (BIFF) and geographically-specific festivals such as London East Asia Film Festival (LEAFF) and New York Asia Film Festival.

- Malaysian production company **ACE Pictures** was shortlisted by the largest independent film festival, Sundance in 2020, with its fantasy drama *Come Away* which starred A-listers Angelina Jolie, David Oyelowo and Michael Caine.¹³⁹ The company's *Clemency* won the Grand Jury Prize at the 2019 Sundance Film Festival.¹⁴⁰
- **KUMAN Pictures**, set up in 2018 by film maker and publisher, Amir Muhammad, produces low-budget thrillers and horror films. Its film *ROH* was selected as the country's Oscar submission for Best Foreign Film (the North American distribution rights were picked up by Film Movement).
- Malaysia is a **preferred ASEAN destination for overseas film production and post-production work**, including high budget Hollywood films and television series. Recent successes include post-production for Disney+ series *The Mandalorian* and *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*, which was outsourced to Base Digital Production Sdn Bhd in Kuala Lumpur. The latter received 30 percent rebate under the Film In Malaysia Incentive (FIMI). The rebate is given for post-production or filming work done in Malaysia. Around 78 visual effect artists from Base Digital Production worked on the post-production for *The Mandalorian* and *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* and over 40 of them were local talents.

The Mandalorian and *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* are the latest in a growing portfolio of significant and acclaimed Malaysian contributions to the international film industry. Recent success includes the Cyberjaya-based subsidiary of the California special effects company, Rhythm & Hues, which won an Oscar Academy Award for their special effects work on *The Life of Pi* (2012).

Film in Focus



According to CENDANA:

- Film is the largest part of the cultural and creative economy – in terms of jobs and GDP for Malaysia.
- The sector is also the fastest growing and the most international, especially among digitally-driven activities such as animation, virtual reality, gaming, etc.
- Film is one of the most 'talent-hungry' creative sectors, attracting the highest proportion of graduate employees and with constant need for new entrants.
- Film is significantly cluster-driven with firms co-locating to access talent, knowledge, technology, connectivity, and investment.

(Source: CENDANA, 2018)



- Local productions are made in Malay, English, Mandarin Chinese and Tamil, and may reach markets e.g. US, UK, Europe, China, Taiwan
- Viewing habits in Malaysia are influenced by ethnicity with high levels of segmentation.

¹³⁹ <https://www.malaymail.com/news/showbiz/2020/01/28/sundance-film-festival-screens-malaysian-production-firms-fantasy-drama-com/1832156>

¹⁴⁰ <https://www.thestar.com.my/lifestyle/entertainment/2019/03/07/sundance-clemency-ace-productions>

Similar success stories of Malaysian participation in *Transformers*, *Alvin and The Chipmunks* are a testament to the country's international-quality animation capability. Yet despite these high-profile international success stories, animation and special effects companies can often struggle due to a limited domestic market.¹⁴¹

- Leading international visual effects company, Base Media, based in China and Kuala Lumpur has increased the proportion of local artistic talent in the workforce from 25% to 80% (around 70 artists), via better partnership with higher education institutions and FINAS.¹⁴²

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Malaysia is becoming a real hub for post-production, and animation is doing really well. I put it down to a strong focus on digital infrastructure and a generation of creatives inspired by blockbusters like Star Wars. But there is still so much room to grow – the creative industries need to be given the same level of significance as the wider digital landscape. We need to develop more Malaysian content.

**Affendy Ali, General Manager, Group Legal Department,
Media Prima Berhad & Cendana Board Member¹⁴³**

¹⁴¹ Neo, P. X. and Loh, Y. L. Malaysian Film and Visual Effects Industry: Challenges and Future. Quarterly Review of Film and Video. (Nov 2020).

¹⁴² <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2020/10/14/70-malaysian-artistes-show-their-talent-in-hollywood>

¹⁴³ Interview by TFCC.

2 Introducing the Policy and Investment Landscape for Film and TV

Set up in 1980, the National Film Development Corporation Malaysia (Perbadanan Kemajuan Filem Nasional or FINAS) is the central government agency responsible for the film industry. Under FINAS, the Film in Malaysia Incentive¹⁴⁴ was launched in 2013 with two aims:

- To encourage Malaysian film producers to create creative content for film, television and other screen production for international and domestic consumption;
- To attract foreign film producers and investors to conduct filming and production in Malaysia and so support a long-term ambition to transform Malaysia into an international film location.

FINAS provides a 30 percent cash rebate to production and post-production costs as **financial incentive** for creative content development, specifically for animation, special effect or VFX works. This has attracted Hollywood productions such as *Star Wars*, Netflix's *6 Underground* and *The Mandalorian* to invest.¹⁴⁵

- Other government approaches to strategically enhance the Malaysian film sector include FINAS' organisation of international showcases at international film festivals such as in 2016 at Cannes.¹⁴⁶

The National Creative Industries Policy for Malaysia (DIKN) commits grants and loans (to the amount of RM200 million) to fund creative activities. These include production in film and drama, music, animation, advertisements and generally increasing the output of local content.

Government policy has incentivised local content creation, accelerating digital content specialisms (e.g. animation) and building a level of critical mass. The focus has been across the film and TV value chain, with growth and consolidation in terms of originality, creativity, diversity, innovation, capital investment and skilled technical human capital.¹⁴⁷

Bilateral Agreement



A co-production agreement was entered between Malaysia and Australia in 2019.

It was reported that Malaysia had been in discussion with various other countries to formulate similar bilateral co-production packs, although there has been little news of progress since then.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁴ <http://www.filminmalaysia.com/incentives/foreign-application>

¹⁴⁵ <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/malaysian-government-welcomes-more-hollywood-film-vfx-work-with-base-media-301195167.html>

¹⁴⁶ <https://www.screendaily.com/cannes/malaysian-films-to-be-showcased-at-cannes/5103813.article>

¹⁴⁷ Lee and Ruth, 2019.

¹⁴⁸ <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2019/11/29/malaysian-film-industry-in-for-better-times-following-co-production-agreeme/1814597>

Tapping the Digital Market



Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation (MDEC)¹⁴⁹ is the government agency under the Ministry of Communications and Multimedia Malaysia entrusted to lead the nation's digital economy forward.

- Digital Content Grant (DCG) and Digital Content Creators Challenge (DC3) programmes: the former aims to provide relief to digital companies, while the latter engages creative individuals.¹⁵⁰
- MDEC launched a week-long digital programme #YoungCreators as a part of the Covid-relief plan to empower youth by upskilling and harnessing social media market opportunities as creators.¹⁵¹ Social media partners for #YoungCreators include TikTok, Snapchat, Binumi and other leading content providers

who shared their insights at a culminating event, Creative Content Challenge. In addition to cash rewards, top 10 creators will be selected to be inducted in a 12-month Creators Network Programme conducted by CastingAsia.

The Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint¹⁵² released in 2021, further saw the launch of MyDIGITAL that aims to accelerate the country's progress as a technologically-driven economy. It aims to pivot to the opportunities of eCommerce and bridge the digital divide.

- Through this plan, by 2025, the digital economy is expected to contribute 22.6% to Malaysia's GDP and to create 500,000 job opportunities in the digital economy.

The country's multi-lingual talent (including English and Mandarin Chinese), relatively low production cost, and supportive government policy makes it a top choice for international production in SEA.¹⁵³ The style and aesthetics of Malaysia productions varies widely and depends on the genre and team. One of the most distinctive features of contemporary Malaysian cinema is the showcase of the country's multi-ethnic and multilingual cultural reality and the tensions thereof, while sharing a parallel with wider artistic movements such as of social realism or (post)-new wave across Southeast and East Asia.¹⁵⁴

¹⁴⁹ <https://mdec.my>

¹⁵⁰ Focus Malaysia, Apr 2020. <https://focusmalaysia.my/mainstream/ministry-committed-to-help-develop-digital-creative-content-industry>

¹⁵¹ Lohewar, R., Malay Mail (Aug 2020) <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/08/24/mdec-launches-new-digital-platform-to-nurture-creative-skills-in-youths/1896639>

¹⁵² <https://www.epu.gov.my/sites/default/files/2021-02/malaysia-digital-economy-blueprint.pdf>

¹⁵³ <https://www.iskandarmalaysiastudios.com/why-film-in-malaysia>

¹⁵⁴ Pugsley, P. C, Tradition, Culture and Aesthetics in Contemporary Asian Cinema. (2013).

¹⁵⁵ Interview by TFCC.

¹⁵⁶ <https://www.nst.com.my/lifestyle/groove/2020/01/559069/showbiz-msian-director-quah-breaks-box-office-record-china>

¹⁵⁷ Al Jazeera, Nov 2019. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2019/11/22/china-boycott-boosts-oscar-of-chinese-language-cinema> / The Guardian, Nov 2019 <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/nov/24/chinese-oscar-taiwanese-stars-shine-amid-china-boycott-of-awards>

¹⁵⁸ The Star, Nov 2020. <https://www.thestar.com.my/lifestyle/entertainment/2020/11/22/malaysia039s-chong-keat-aun-wins-best-new-director-at-golden-horse-awards-in-taiwan>

¹⁵⁹ <https://www.cna.com.tw/news/firstnews/202011270060.aspx>



The intermingling of cultures can bring new quality content from Malaysia. There would be growing interest in this (and it could complement the tourism industry) by telling fresh and new stories of the country. But all this boils down to funding.

Affendy Ali, General Manager, Group Legal Department,
Media Prima Berhad & Cendana Board Member¹⁵⁵

Cultural Affinity – a Pan-Chinese Value Chain



Malaysia's ethnic Chinese scene has a long-established cultural affinity with the wider pan-Chinese film business in Hong Kong, Taiwan, China and Singapore. The commercial success of a Chinese thriller film, *Sheep Without A Shepherd*, directed by Penang-born, Malaysian Chinese director Sam Quah Boon Lip surpassed 1 billion yuan (approx. £110M) in early 2021 – despite the pandemic. This has made Quah the first Malaysian filmmaker to reach this landmark.¹⁵⁶ The wide market appeal allowed the film to receive an extended theatrical run.

- The film is a remake of the 2013 Indian Malayalam-language film *Drishyam* which had topped India's box office. Quah's production features an acting line-up from China, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Separately, the recent Chinese boycott of Taiwan's Golden Horse Awards (dubbed the 'Oscars' of pan-Chinese movies by Al Jazeera and The Guardian)¹⁵⁷ gave Malaysian home-grown film productions a boost in international profile.

- This includes Malaysian director Chong Keat-aun of *The Story of Southern Islet* winning the Best New Director award at the 57th Golden Horse Awards in Taipei and also winning the Best Film award at the Istanbul Film Awards in 2020.¹⁵⁸
- However, this release was dogged by a censorship wrangle (common in Malaysia). Despite recognition abroad, the producer was asked to cut out more than a dozen of scenes related to religious ceremonies, making Chong consider withdrawing from exhibition and distribution within Malaysia.¹⁵⁹

The maturing ecosystem and increasingly globalised value chain around film production has led to increased collaboration and receiving international acknowledgement, such as:

- Malaysian-Singaporean song writing team taking the Best Original Film Song award with *Your Name Engraved Herein*, sung by Taiwanese pop star Crow Lu, at the 57th Golden Horse Awards.

3 Domestic Market Growth

Figure 5 Total Cinema Gross Taking by Language (RM/Million): 2016 – 2020 (Source: FINAS)

*Data should consider Covid restriction and impact in 2020

Film/Year	Local Films	Chinese Films	Indian Films	English Films	Indonesian Films	Other Films	Total (RM/Million)
2016	83.06	100.35	71.44	617.31	6.59	35.10	91.30
2017	57.57	89.30	65.02	739.99	11.88	19.88	983.64
2018	170.40	72.17	60.68	707.02	10.21	22.98	1.04 billion
2019	144.71	93.70	65.48	737.06	13.64	21.86	1.08 billion
2020	111.62	26.69	10.59	64.04	1.53	13.78	228.25

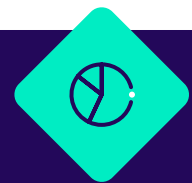
Whilst market share is disproportionately dominated by Hollywood films, which benefited from all groups of audiences otherwise fragmented along ethnic lines, local films have seen a boost in box office performance since 2018.¹⁶⁰

This is in part an outcome of Government intervention – to build capacity and quality in the film and TV sectors. It is also in part an outcome of the **increasing appeal of home-grown stories told by home-grown talent**. Local filmmakers are starting to make waves and the production ecosystem is better equipped to support them. These accumulative results have shown in box-office performance and international award recognition.

- Malaysia's box office for domestic films broke the RM100 million (US\$24.5 million) barrier for the first time in 2019, with 55 local productions generating RM170 million in ticket sales – boosted three-fold since 2017, which saw domestic films bring in RM57 million.¹⁶¹

- Produced by Les' Copaque Production, the Malaysian computer-animated children's adventure film *Upin & Ipin: The Lone Gibbon Kris* released in 2019 based on its TV series, was reported to have successfully outshone Disney's *Incredibles 2* to claim the highest grossing animation of all time from a Southeast Asian country.¹⁶² However, Malaysian productions are often thwarted in export markets due to the cultural-specific content – such as in the case of *Upin & Ipin*. Even with long-standing domestic popularity, the series was only able to find export channels in Indonesia.¹⁶³

The state of Selangor, and Kuala Lumpur city have the largest movie-going populations, followed by Johor. (FINAS)



¹⁶⁰ <https://www.finas.gov.my/en/industry-information/cinema-admission-by-language>

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² South China Morning Post, Jan 2020. <https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/entertainment/article/3045529/how-malaysia-and-singapores-film-industries-spotlighted>

¹⁶³ Barker and Lee, 2017.

4 Digital and Physical Infrastructure

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We were the most watched non-Korean show on the Viu service.

Min Lim, head of production at Double Vision¹⁶⁴

The domestic market for local films has boomed within the recent years, whilst online streaming platforms have exponentially expanded the funding sources, distribution channels, exposure/market reach and legacy/longevity for locally-produced content.

Malaysian talent has been playing an increasingly important part in the maturing pan-Asian film industry. The establishment of regional headquarters for HBO, Netflix and Lucasfilm in Singapore, is generating a critical mass of investment and infrastructure.¹⁶⁵

The rise of online streaming platforms provides greater opportunities for investment, genre diversity, access to distribution channels, and thus market penetration and cultural influence for Malaysian content.

- Director Syamsul Yusof's horror title *Munafik 2*, tapped into Malaysian's passion for the genre. Its domestic box office success enabled its inclusion to the Netflix content library in May 2019 and is now streaming worldwide to a global audience.
- The recent success of TV series *The Bridge*, tapped into the daily reality of Tuas Bridge, which links Malaysia and Singapore across the Johore Strait. The first season was produced in 2018 by Hong Kong's video streaming provider Viu and Singapore's HBO Asia, with the Kuala Lumpur-based film production company Double Vision behind its success.

Disney+ Hotstar and Sooka (owned by Astro) will now acquire/produce Malaysian shows/films (although they will mainly show foreign ones). Additional streaming services are WeTV, Viu and UnifiTV.

Content Fever



China's state-owned Golden Shield Television Centre of the People's Republic of China and the Changsha LeFeng Culture Communication Co Ltd (LeFeng) began a 5-year partnership with Malaysia's Moths Studios Sdn Bhd.

This partnership taps into the increased appetite in content consumption and aims to produce a series of multiple cultural entertainment projects such as movies, dramas and other related events.

A part of this joint project involves an RM237 million China-Malaysia international co-production movie, tentatively titled *Beyond Life and Death*, which is being filmed in Johor.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴ <https://asia.nikkei.com/Life-Arts/Arts/Malaysia-breaks-new-ground-for-Viu-HBO-and-Southeast-Asian-TV>

¹⁶⁵ <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/lists/markets-leading-expansion-southeast-asian-cinema-1211133>

¹⁶⁶ Malay Mail, Dec 2019 <https://www.malaymail.com/news/showbiz/2019/12/03/well-known-china-movie-producer-set-to-invest-rm3b-in-malaysian-film-indust/1815681>

Infrastructure

Research and Development (R&D) and innovation is at the heart of the sector, where it drives a convergence of a growing R&D ecosystem for film and TV, mobilised by digital technology. There is a growing 'studio model' – co-locating technical and creative innovation. New creative hubs and clusters have grown in recent years – a large proportion of which are in Kuala Lumpur/Klang Valley, including the technology district Cyberjaya.

- **Accelerator** Kre8tif! Inc. previously known as Malaysia Animation Creative Content Centre (MAC3) provides support to content producers, SMEs and start-ups to gain access to network, resource and skills.¹⁶⁷

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When I was teaching at MMU, a friend, Amir Muhammad, was also curating a programme called “Malaysian Shorts” at Kelab Seni Filem Malaysia. It was the most important platform for any new filmmaker at that time. From there, we formed a group of friends who helped and supported one another. We took turns filling all the different roles needed to make films — from producer to actor. It was the best film school.

Tan Chui Mui, independent film maker

¹⁶⁷ <https://mdec.my/what-we-offer/kre8tif-inc-2>

Both loose and professional networks are playing a vital development role in fostering a more dynamic ecosystem. **Kelab Seni Filem Malaysia** is the oldest-running film club in Malaysia dedicated to screening international and domestic films, both films from around the world, and local productions from young and upcoming filmmakers to a Malaysian audience.

- **Primework Studios** is the largest production house in Malaysia, producing an average of 5,000 hours of television content and 6 feature films annually. It is the only aggregator film and TV company in Malaysia which works across the whole menu of TV and film production, content sales, film distribution and marketing, animation, talent management as well as licensing and merchandising. It is an award-winning content company producing over 3,000 hours of content annually for a range of platforms including television, cinema and digital. The production house is the creative force behind a wide range of content genres including entertainment, animation, magazine, documentary, sports, and drama content creation and production: film, TV, on-line, animation, news.
- **Astro** is a market-leading Malaysian satellite television provider. Its operations are based at the All Asia Broadcast Centre located in Bukit Jalil, Kuala Lumpur, and MEASAT in Cyberjaya. Astro serves 5.7 million or 75% of Malaysian households across their TV, radio, digital and commerce platforms. In 2019, Astro launched the Ultra Box, a 4K Ultra High Definition (4K UHD) Set-top box with Cloud Recording. With three exclusive streaming services, Astro GO, HBO GO and iQIYI, Astro has the largest customer base for video streaming services in Malaysia, with over 2.6 million registered users.

New Types of Institutional Partnership

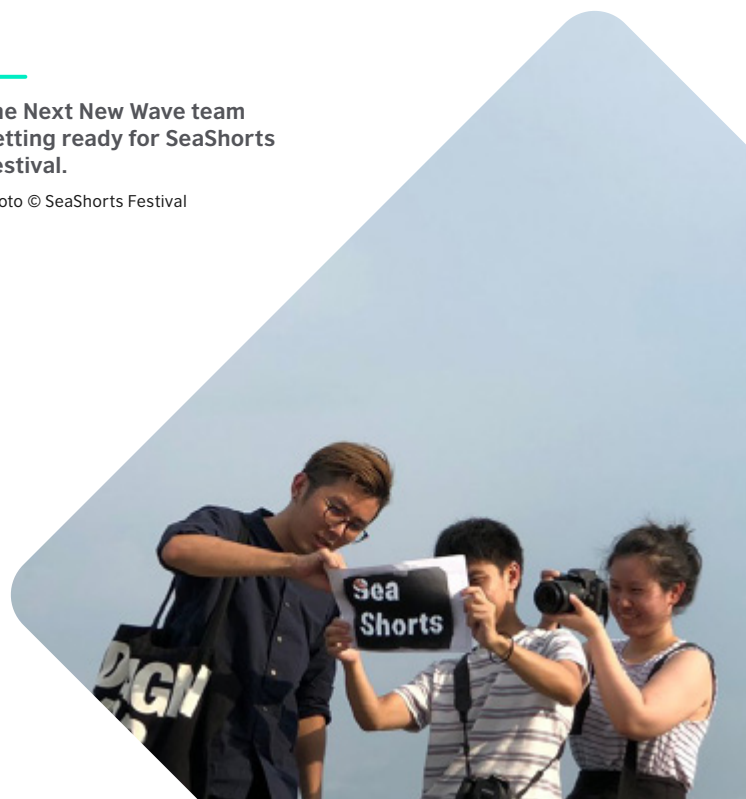


In 2020, **Limkokwing University of Creative Technology**, with the endorsement of FINAS, signed a memorandum with six trade associations to map out areas of collaboration to tackle industry needs for talent developing.¹⁶⁸

- The Professional Workers Association (PROFIMA),
- Artistes Association of Malaysia (SENIMAN),
- Film Directors Association of Malaysia (FDAM),
- Malaysian Society of Cinematographers (MySC),
- Creative Writers Guild of Malaysia (CGM), and
- Post Production Association of Malaysia (POSTAM)

The Next New Wave team getting ready for SeaShorts Festival.

Photo © SeaShorts Festival



¹⁶⁸ The Star, Aug 2020 <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/education/2020/08/16/upskilling-reskilling-talents>

5 Key Platforms (selected)

Malaysia has a vibrant commercial film consumption scene and a healthy mix of alternative spaces that presents and programmes independent, art-house movies. Covid has negatively impacted their livelihood.

Tanjong Golden Village (TGV) Cinema and the **Golden Screen Cinema** are the largest commercial movie chains in Malaysia. Aiming at Instagram-native Gen T, **Aurum Theatre** at The Gardens Mall, Kuala Lumpur was debuted by the Golden Screen Cinema to provide a luxury movie-going experience.¹⁶⁹

Cinephilia is a boutique film club in Kuala Lumpur with a keen interest to screen films that were never released in Malaysia, including special programmes such as sci-fi and film noir.¹⁷⁰

REXXKL in Kuala Lumpur's Chinatown, is one of a number of creative hubs that screens film as well as showcases theatre, music and comedy talent.¹⁷²

The **Coliseum** is one of the oldest cinemas, now operated by the Lotus Five Star chain, with a focus on Bollywood and Tamil-language films.¹⁷³

Amenic Film Space, opened by former advertising agency colleagues Jovy Low and Tay Shen Thuu; rents out cosy cinema-grade theatre spaces to enjoy streaming contents and over 150 titles with friends and family.¹⁷⁴

Mixed use spaces such as **Pisco Bar** in Kuala Lumpur regularly screen art-house films.

Iskandar Malaysia Studios, Johor

Iskandar Malaysia Studios is a 30-acre government-led film hub in Johor that ambitiously positioned Malaysia as the production powerhouse in Asia Pacific, rebranded from Pinewood Iskandar Malaysia Studios after Pinewood pulled out from its initial 10-year partnership with the government in 2019.

Despite its high-profile early success, relative geographical inaccessibility, a lack of proper

infrastructure and crew were reported to be the reasons behind the break-up.¹⁵⁹

However, with pent-up demand for content caused by Covid-19, there is some confidence that the hub can flourish. Again, its multi-lingual talent, relatively low production cost, supportive government incentives, and proximity to Singapore, all work in its favour.¹⁷⁵

¹⁶⁹ <https://my.asiatatler.com/life/golden-screen-cinemas-aurum-theatre-makes-going-to-the-movies-a-real-luxury>

¹⁷⁰ <https://www.nextnewwave.com.my/cinephilia>

¹⁷¹ <https://www.thestar.com.my/lifestyle/living/2019/11/18/remember-the-old-rex-cinema-on-jalan-sultan-kl-it039s-been-reinvented-as-rexkl-a-bustling-arts-culture-and-events-space>

¹⁷² <https://thinkcity.com.my/the-coliseum-championing-the-independent-heritage-cinema>

¹⁷³ <https://igniteunmc.com/your-non-typical-cinemas-in-kuala-lumpur>

¹⁷⁴ Hollywood Reporter, Jul 2019. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/whats-post-pinewood-future-malaysias-150m-film-studio-1224498>

¹⁷⁵ <https://www.iskandarmalaysiastudios.com/why-film-in-malaysia>

In addition to the **Malaysia Film Festival**, the **Malaysia International Film Festival** and **Malaysia Golden Global Awards**¹⁷⁶ were founded in 2016. (The Kuala Lumpur International Film Festival (KLIFF) has ceased operation.)

Next New Wave is an initiative founded in 2015 to focus on nurturing young and emerging filmmakers in Malaysia by supporting independent and art-house films and collaborations across Southeast Asia. These include crowdfunding **SeaShort Festival** to showcase short films from the region.¹⁷⁷

European Film Festival in Malaysia (EFF), organised by the Delegation of European Union in Malaysia, programmes annual showcase of independent films from across the European Union.¹⁷⁸

G-Short is a short film festival held as part of the George Town Festival 2021 (for 90-second productions).¹⁷⁹

FINAS' **Museum of Moving Images** features archival footage and exhibitions about the film industry of Malaysia.¹⁸⁰

Civic Rights and Activism

Founded in Penang in 2003, **FreedomFilmFestival (FFF)** is run by the Freedom Film Network, under the human rights centre KOMAS (Pusat Komuniti Masyarakat). It is a fixture for documentary film exhibition, promoting civic rights through social films.¹⁸¹

Freedom Film Network alongside the Goethe-Institut was rewarded by the European Union for a five-year initiative called the 'Social Films for

Social Change: Creative Media, Films and Videos to Strengthen Democracy and Human Rights in Malaysia'.

- As part of the Social Films for Social Change initiative, *Pengidup Aku (My Life)* is a short social film that documents the effects of urban migration and environmental change for indigenous peoples in Sarawak's rural area.

Behind the scenes of a social documentary with an indigenous community.

Photo © Freedom Film Network

¹⁷⁶ <https://www.mgga.com.my>

¹⁷⁷ <https://www.nextnewwave.com.my/who>

¹⁷⁸ <https://euff.com.my/about>

¹⁷⁹ <https://georgetownfestival.com/2021/g-short-short-film-festival>

¹⁸⁰ <https://www.finass.gov.my/en/museum-moving-image-momifinas>

¹⁸¹ <https://freedomfilm.my/about>



6 Movers and Shakers in Malaysian Film and TV (selected)

Malaysian-based

Lina Tan, founder of RED Films and RED Comm, a production house for Malaysian independent film makers and directors.¹⁸² Her production of *Istanbul Aku Datang!* won Best Picture – Comedy and *Songlap* claimed the title of Best Picture – Action at the 2013 ASEAN International Film Festival and Awards (AIFFA).

U-Wei Haji Saari, internationally-renowned director and screenwriter, was the first Malaysian director to be invited to show at the prestigious Directors' Fortnight at Cannes in 1995. He is an active member of the Malaysian Film Directors Association.

Malaysian Diaspora

The country has been an export hub for talent in the film business from directors, writers, actors and actresses to producers and skilled tech workers.

Ipoh-born Hollywood actress **Michelle Yeoh** pursued her early career in Hong Kong, and gained international recognition with her role as the lead Bond girl in *Tomorrow Never Dies* (1997). Yeoh was confirmed to join the Marvel superhero universe with a 2021 film titled *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*.¹⁸³

Petaling Jaya-born Hollywood screenwriter, **Adele Lim**, worked nearly 20 years in the US television industry before gaining international recognition as screenwriter of *Crazy Rich Asians* and Disney animation hit, *Raya and the Last Dragon*.

Born in Sarawak and synonymous with the Asian post-new wave, art-house cinema superstar director **Tsai Ming-liang** rose to prominence in the 90s. Tsai left Malaysia to pursue his higher education and later international career in Taiwan. His work *Face (or Visage)* was collected as a first commissioned film by the Louvre in 2009.

US-based Malaysian comedian **Ronney Chieng** is a senior correspondent at American late-night talk show *The Daily Show*, with an increased presence in film productions of late. He started his career with stand-up comedy gigs in Singapore and Australia – an often-travelled route undertaken by Malaysian talents when breaking out as they cultivate a bigger regional audience.

Actor **Iedil Putra** has been a regular in international film and theatre productions (such as *Beautiful Water*, which was staged in Japan with a line-up of actors from Malaysia, Indonesia and Japan).¹⁸⁴

¹⁸² <http://red.webtivate.com.my/webpages/our-story.aspx>

¹⁸³ <https://www.thestar.com.my/lifestyle/entertainment/2020/12/13/michelle-yeoh-confirms-her-role-in-marvel-superhero-film-039shang-chi039>

¹⁸⁴ <https://my.asiatatler.com/life/malaysian-actors-to-watch-in-2020>

Production Power on the Rise vs Talent Pipeline



Joanne Goh, a Malaysian film producer and business executive is also Founder and Chairperson of Malaysia International Film Festival (MIFFest) and Malaysia Golden Global Awards (MGGA); Founder of Jazzy Group, TV and film production house.

- Goh started her career in entertainment by organising concerts both locally and internationally. In more recent times, she has shifted gear to work as executive producer of **Jazzy Group** which contributed to the success of Netflix-backed *Crossroads: One Two Jaga* (taking home six Malaysia Film Festival Awards in 2019)¹⁸⁵ and pan-Asian film *Nina Wu* (by the Myanmar-born, Taiwan-based director Midi Z), which reached international acclaim when screened in the Un Certain Regard section at the 2019 Cannes Film Festival.¹⁸⁶
- In 2016, she founded the Malaysia International Film Festival (MIFFest) and the Malaysia Golden Global Awards (MGGA). MIFFest has not only

brought local films to international audiences, but also helped attract top-tier international investors and producers to Malaysia.

An active participant in the Malaysian independent film scene, **Tan Chui Mui** is a film maker, producer, educator and an occasional actress. Her short films focus on social issues in Malaysia.

- In an interview with *Wallpaper* Malaysia, Tan advocated for a more diverse talent pipeline and training programme in higher education that broadens the career imagination and prospect for essential personnel in the supports a holistic development of the industry – by shifting the focus from directors and actors, to producers, assistant directors and scriptwriters.
- Tan set up Da Huang Pictures in 2005 with partners and supports young Malaysian filmmakers in their production of short films or first feature films.



... too many people wanting to become directors, but not enough are choosing to be producers, assistant directors, and scriptwriters. There are no film schools that teach producing.

Tan Chui Mui, film maker, producer, educator

¹⁸⁵ <https://www.thestar.com.my/lifestyle/entertainment/2019/03/31/one-two-jaga-wins-best-film>

¹⁸⁶ <https://www.screendaily.com/news/luxbox-boards-sales-on-midi-zs-un-certain-regard-selection-nina-wu-exclusive/5139044.article>

7

Censorship and Licensing

Malaysia imposes film censorship under the Film Censorship Board of Malaysia, Home Ministry. Content is vetted for:

- Nudity/sexual references
- Profanity (for PG-13)
- LGBT indications (except same-sex hugging)
- Excessive violence (for PG-13 content)
- Words/conversations that cause racial/religious disharmony.

A newly-imposed requirement in 2020 seeks to bring online activities and foreign content under more regulatory oversight. With much controversy, this reflects a tighter grip of the Malaysia government on content and free speech. All production, distribution or broadcast activities need to obtain a Film Production Licence and a Film Shooting Certificate from FINAS before taking place.¹⁸⁷ Far-reaching and expansive, this covers films and videos on all media outlets – from personal handsets/platform to more traditional media.¹⁸⁸ Such a measure has stoked fear and confusion among the creative communities specifically about the future of cultural liberty and grassroots creative experimentation.¹⁸⁹

Additional Resources

- FINAS directory of top management: <https://www.finas.gov.my/en/direktori-pegawai>
- Filming locations in Malaysia: <https://www.kftv.com/country/malaysia/guide/production-guide>
<https://www.thelocationguide.com/locations/malaysia-2>

¹⁸⁷ CNA, Jul 2020. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/malaysia-filming-licence-social-media-multimedia-minister-12956526>

¹⁸⁸ The Star, Jul 2020. <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2020/07/23/all-filming-even-on-social-media-requires-licence-says-saifuddin>

¹⁸⁹ <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/07/23/malaysian-content-creators-fear-for-future-of-creative-industry-after-minis/1887464>

Chapter 5: Contemporary Music

With thanks to Azmyl Yunor
for comments and input

1 Sector profile

The music industry, like other cultural sectors in Malaysia, is diverse and draws from a rich mix of cultural traditions. Music, alongside performing arts, connects the country's distinctive intangible heritage to a contemporary reality where multi-lingual code-switching offers a distinctive structure and flavour to the art form.

With a growing domestic consumer market, the Malaysian music industry is actively expanding. Covid-19 has, however, dramatically reduced revenue generation via live music and events, with on-line streaming providing the key revenue source for a sector which is struggling to stay alive during this year of lockdowns. But the sector has been somewhat bolstered by relatively recent investment in music education, infrastructure (e.g. performing venues and rehearsal spaces), and new retail channels.¹⁹⁰

The Malaysian music industry is heavily linked to the wider entertainment industry – e.g. TV, radio and film. Indeed, the Malaysian creative economy is one built on a convergence of art forms and technologies, with music a key part of what could be termed the wider 'entertainment sector'. For example:

- Pastel Lite is an indie-electric duo that performs in both Malay and English. In their critically acclaimed full-length album *Balada*, the duo sought the talent of sitar player Keeran Raj to perform on their recording for 'Sunny'.¹⁹¹ Their music video for 'Damself' is a collaboration with Malaysia artist and film director Zul Luey and his studio Luey Motion Lab. The duo has opened for English pop band The XX and Australian musician Tame Impala for their acts in Kuala Lumpur.

In addition to contemporary music, the landscape of traditional music sector bears a closer affinity to the wider performing arts sector in terms of cultural development, resource allocation and market overview. (See **Chapter 7** on performing arts for more.)

The demand for live music is particularly strong among younger Malaysians, especially in the metropolitan Klang Valley region.¹⁹²

There was (until Covid-19), a growing scene of live music events of different scales (from major league international artists to emergent Malaysian acts). The festival sector is also a key platform for music of all varieties.

Safehouse KL is an independent music venue located in an intimate upstairs shoplot fitted for music performances and food and beverages.

Photo © Safehouse KL



¹⁹⁰ CENDANA, Independent Music Ecosystem Map. 2020 [https://www.cendana.com.my/clients/Cendana_78A7CADC-1C4A-44E8-A815-E2B4C1D11FE0/contentms/img/Map/IM/Web_KVIEM_Bookletversion09%20\(1\)-compressed.pdf](https://www.cendana.com.my/clients/Cendana_78A7CADC-1C4A-44E8-A815-E2B4C1D11FE0/contentms/img/Map/IM/Web_KVIEM_Bookletversion09%20(1)-compressed.pdf)

¹⁹¹ <https://juiceonline.com/pastel-lite-balada>

¹⁹² http://www.mycreative.com.my/news_events/a-s.w.o.t-analysis-on-malaysian-music-industry-other-who-speak-5-fuelling-t



The Malaysian
music industry generates

RM5.5 – 6.1 bil

every year in
value-added impact

(PwC, 2016)



In 2018

60%

attended live musical
performances/concerts

54%

attended independent
live music performances
in Kuala Lumpur

(CENDANA)

Hip-hop Boom in Malaysia and Beyond



Hip-pop remains popular in Malaysia and across the region.

- With the regional headquarters of multinational label chain Def Jam Recordings setting up shop in Singapore in 2019, Malaysia and other neighbouring countries benefited from the transnational, multiracial and multilingual strategy of developing urban, hip-pop music talent Southeast Asia.¹⁹³
- Joe Flizzow's barber shop is an anchor of the hip hop community where his popular Youtube show, *16 Baris Live*, is filmed and produced. Hosted by Flizzow, the show follows top Asian rappers battle for the top spot.
- Responding to the hip-hop boom in Malaysia, Yo! MTV Raps, a popular television show started in the 90s in the US and Europe, also chose to launch an Asian version in 2019, with its first season focusing on stars from Singapore, Malaysia, South Korea and beyond.

¹⁹³ <https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/entertainment/article/3118760/malaysian-chinese-hip-hop-given-voice-rapper-dato-maw>

2 The Music Industry Ecosystem in Malaysia

Public Support

CENDANA, the national development agency for the cultural industries, has included independent music as a focus area. Their support aims to cover a wide range of industry professionals from independent musicians, promoters, recording labels, artist managers and cultural workers in the music business.

The term 'independent' is loosely defined by CENDANA as musicians and creators that are yet to be signed with any major commercial labels, corporations or their subsidiaries. Independent here also refers to a more cosmopolitan community than the mainstream market's ethnic/language segmentation. The genres covered include classical, Jazz, world music, traditional music, contemporary popular music, indie and alternative, rock (blues, modern, post rock etc), urban (hip hop, rap etc), metal and punk, electronica and cross-disciplinary creations where music is the main content.

With the Covid-19 pandemic effectively postponing all live music, the music industry has been calling for investment and support to build digital capacity, crack down on piracy, and increase revenue via streaming.¹⁹⁴ This is consistent with the Malaysian government's ongoing drive to position Malaysia as a digital superpower, as evidenced in the 2021 Digital Economy Blueprint.

CENDANA's Independent Music Funding Programme¹⁹⁵ provides support for:

- Development and creation of new original or adapted works (recordings, singles, EPs, album etc);
- Performances and showcases (within Malaysia only);
- Creation of digital content (music videos, live performance videos etc).

Covid Relief – All in on Digital



- Support, managed by MyCreative Ventures under the PENJANA plan for the creative industries, covers the wider entertainment, film and publishing industries, featuring grants that encourage digital marketing, promotion, exhibition and creation.

A scene at the Rainforest World Music Festival.

Photo © Sarawak Tourism Board



¹⁹⁴ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/524837>

¹⁹⁵ https://www.cendana.com.my/clients/Cendana_78A7CADC-1C4A-44E8-A815-E2B4C1D11FE0/contentms/img/Independent/imfp-en.pdf

At a regional level, the music industry receives some state support for activities such as festivals, youth music programmes and cross-over with the performing arts. This can cause some tension between, for example, the development of innovative music and the requirement to deliver impact for tourism. Sarawak state is a key investor in one of Malaysia's main music festivals:

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Because [the Rainforest World Music Festival] is managed by the tourism department, it is a balancing act to have the more crowd-pleasing fusion music and the traditional and rooted activities. For the last two festivals, we have had an indigenous stage and in 2012 we set up an indoor theatre stage. Also arts, crafts and cuisine have a role to play... so the festival gives a blend of diverse cultural experiences...

Jun-Lin Yeoh, artistic director, Rainforest World Music Festival¹⁹⁶

Corporate Sponsorship

In Malaysia, the music industry is integrated through a wider process of commercialisation and brand development, with Malaysians avid consumers for retail and lifestyle experiences. International FMCG brands regularly sponsor live music events and even specific acts. There is a long-standing legacy of corporate sponsorship in supporting festivals and talent competitions – such as the Red Bull Blend 2016 rap competition.

- Levi's Music Project expanded to Malaysia for the first time in 2020, aims to "empower the next generation of homegrown musical talent."¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁶ Interview by TFCC.

¹⁹⁷ <https://www.levi.com.my/music/artists>

3

Music Streaming and Digital Music

While the analogue record industry is in decline, the digital music sector continues to climb. For Malaysia, digital music generates USD\$19.3million (£13.4million) in trade revenue, while the CD and other physical channels still have a combined total of around USD\$0.2million.¹⁹⁸

Independent musicians have long capitalised on social media (YouTube) and music services (iTunes, Spotify, Soundcloud, etc) to reach both domestic and international promoters and audiences.

- According to Pro-Music,¹⁹⁹ there are at least 14 legal internet-based services available in Malaysia.
- The country's digital music segment is projected to generate US\$24million (£16million) in revenue in 2021, enjoying 3.6million users (8.6% increase year

on year) according to Statista. Among which, music streaming is expected to take up over 90% of the overall market.²⁰⁰

- During the pandemic, social media channels such as Instagram live have become a go-to platform where creative talents continue their connection with audience without the need of traditional gatekeepers and presenters. The emerging Clubhouse has created a virtual community where issues concerning Malaysian and the regional music industry continue to be discussed.

The talented Gen T singer and guitarist **Zee Avi** has been central to organising conversations and livestreaming performances through her channels.

Digital Music Platforms – Building New Revenue Opportunities for Malaysia



- Indie band Midnight Fusic achieved stardom via Spotify during their high school years (where their songs have more than 1 million plays) and are now signed to Sony Music.²⁰¹
- UK-based Malaysian singer-songwriter Ariff AB made his breakthrough in the UK first in 2012, after being 'discovered' by award winning artist Patrick Lyons for what he uploaded to

Soundcloud. Lyons was impressed by what he heard and helped Ariff AB arrange gigs and interviews in his first UK tour.²⁰² He became the first Malaysian male singer-songwriter invited to perform at YouTube-Google headquarters in London in 2016 and later received the Young Malaysian International Achiever Award at the Top Asia Corporate Ball in Jakarta, in 2018.

¹⁹⁸ Global Music Report, 2018.

¹⁹⁹ <https://www.pro-music.org/legal-music-services-asia.php>

²⁰⁰ <https://www.statista.com/outlook/202/122/digital-music/malaysia>

²⁰¹ <https://www.fodors.com/world/asia/malaysia/experiences/news/12-artists-and-musicians-making-kuala-lumpur-a-cultural-hub>

²⁰² <https://themalaysianreserve.com/2019/02/26/making-sense-of-the-music-industry>

Music industry Challenges

- Music education at primary and secondary level is relatively limited, which impacts the professional capacity of the music sector upstream. However, Malaysia has a growing mix of professional education institutions – both formal and informal – which provide training for music making and content production.^{203 204}
- Lack of awareness in copyright and intellectual property protection continues to pose a considerable threat to revenue generation in the Malaysian music industry.^{205 206} There is a need for much stronger public education and enforcement of IP laws, plus more effective regulation and royalty collection.
- The ‘mainstreaming’ of international genres is perceived as detrimental to the distinctiveness of Malaysian music. Musicians such as singer-song writer Ariff AB expressed his concern over a perceived lack of originality and risk-taking in the Malaysian music industry, with much of the sector pandering to popular ‘international’ tastes.
- Religious sensitivity and censorship issues can delay approvals (e.g. for live music events), providing an additional ongoing hurdle for music promoters and acts. There are also several high-profile cases where concerts have been pulled at the last minute for reasons of censorship.^{207 208}

“

It’s like a copy-paste system, where younger artists are recruited to be and sound like international pop stars, so it almost sounds repetitive.

Ariff AB, singer-songwriter

Bobo KL is an intimate venue for mixed musical entertainment, among others, located in an upstairs shophouse.

Photo © Bryan Chang

²⁰³ Veerapen, M., A S.W.O.T Analysis on Malaysian Music Industry (Other Who Spoke 5 : Fueling the Kreativ Malaysia), MyCreative, 2017. http://www.mycreative.com.my/news_events/a-s.w.o.t-analysis-on-malaysian-music-industry-other-who-speak-5-fuelling-t

²⁰⁴ CENDANA, 2020.

²⁰⁵ PwC, Economic Impact of the Malaysian Music Industry. RIM: Recording Industry Association Malaysia, 2016.

²⁰⁶ Malaysia – Market Profile, Music Ally. Issue 391, pp.12 – 13. 2017. <https://musically.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Malaysia.pdf>

²⁰⁷ PwC, 2016.

²⁰⁸ MyCreative, 2017.



4 Examples of Music Bodies, Platforms and Players

Industry Bodies

Recording Industry Association of Malaysia, Persatuan Industri Rakaman Malaysia (RIM)²⁰⁹ is the non-profit music organisation, representing over 350 locally incorporated recording companies and businesses. Under the Ministry of Domestic Trade & Consumer Affairs (MDTCA), RIM is a member of the Ministry's Special Copyright Task Force. It is responsible to organise the country's annual music event, Anugerah Industri Muzik (AIM).

Performance Rights Music Licensing Company (PPM)²¹⁰ is the non-profit licensing body. It is responsible for issuing licences and collecting licence fees/ royalties from commercial users of sounds, music videos and/or karaoke recordings.

In addition to government agency CENDANA's Independent Music Funding Programme, **MyCreative Venture**²¹¹ also provides loans to stakeholders in the music industry – including music publishing companies, record labels, and production houses. Through this investment scheme, MyCreative Ventures has contributed to the success of Studio Akarkarya²¹² which has become one of the largest and most up-to-date rehearsal hubs for both professional and amateur musicians.

Festivals and Concerts

Malaysia has a vibrant festival scene. Festivals are a major platform for live music and music development. The festival circuit is also a clear access point for international acts.

Rainforest World Music Festival in Kuching, has been organised by the Sarawak Tourism Board since 1998. It is an annual three-day music festival that celebrates the diversity of world music, a range of collateral offerings from music workshops, cultural displays, craft displays and food stalls, alongside the main-stage evening concerts.²¹³

Rock the World²¹⁴ is one of Malaysia's longest running festivals, which debuted in early 2000 in a car park. It now attracts a stable following of rock fans from across the region. The organisation of Rock the World went on a break from 2018 while remaining active on social media, pending official announcement of their return.

Raising The Bar, Malaysia's premier hip-pop festival celebrated its 10th anniversary in early 2021.²¹⁵

Founded in early 2000, the Kuala Lumpur-based **Urbanscapes**²¹⁶ brings together fields of music, the arts, design, film and other creative disciplines. This city-wide festival now regularly attracts festival hoppers not only across the country but also internationally.

KL Jazz Festival²¹⁷ is an annual event organised by Kinda Blue, the premier Jazz club and restaurant in the capital.

Cyberjaya Multimedia Festival features an eclectic mix of live music, animation, film screenings, creative conferences, tech exhibitions and marketplaces.

Good Vibes Festival²¹⁸ at Genting is hosted in a hilly district of Kuala Lumpur. The weekend festival attracts some of the biggest names from the worlds of indie, pop, hip-hop and electronic music (and has a significant role in attracting tourists to the capital).

²⁰⁹ <http://rim.org.my>

²¹⁰ https://ppm.my/home/website_licensing_tnc

²¹¹ <http://www.mycreative.com.my/industry/show/music>

²¹² <http://www.mycreative.com.my/company/akarkarya>

²¹³ <https://rwmf.net>

²¹⁴ <https://twitter.com/rocktheworldmy>

²¹⁵ https://www.nme.com/en_asia/news/music/malysias-raising-the-bar-festival-marks-10-years-with-virtual-event-sonaone-arabyrd-mc-syze-and-more-2850134

²¹⁶ <https://www.urbanscapes.com.my/about>

²¹⁷ <http://www.klinternationaljazz.com>

²¹⁸ <https://goodvibesfestival.avana.asia>

Upfront Arena²¹⁹ programmes live music and concert tours with bands from across Malaysia, Korea and internationally.

“

The [Rainforest World Music] festival has a complex history because when it started, we had to ‘validate’ local indigenous people that their culture matters and that people would be interested in their traditional music like the nose flute. By bringing in traditional music from across the world, local people could see they have something distinctive and of value. The breakthrough came in year 4 or 5 when the audiences really started to grow... We are growing the ASEAN dimension, such as connecting with indigenous Taiwanese culture and Indonesia. But we also want to collaborate with artists from across the world – from Madagascar to Europe.

**Jun-Lin Yeoh, artistic director,
Rainforest World Music Festival**²²⁰

²¹⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/upfrontMY>

²²⁰ Interview by TFCC.

Music Tourism



Borneo Jazz Festival²²¹ features local and international talent from the world of Jazz. It has a strong emphasis on social responsibility and sustainable development, working closely with the

local Sarawak community. The festival is co-organised by Evelyn Hii, artistic director and founder of No Black Tie, former Jazz Club. Hii states:



The Borneo Jazz Festival is intent on connecting audiences through music and by celebrating the diverse and rich cultural heritage of Sarawak. Our social responsibility within the community is a key driver for our festival this year.

Evelyn Hii, co-organiser Borneo Jazz Festival

With the goal of music tourism in mind, the festival partners with local community members to curate satellite showcases of indigenous cuisine, traditional art and crafts.

The festival has introduced the Borneo Jazz Talent Search, and Borneo Jazz DJ Search programme,

as a core aspect of its community talent cultivation initiative.

Previous editions of the festival included stellar line-up of artists from the USA, Italy, Mexico, Japan, Austria, The Netherlands and some of the region's finest, over the period of three days.

Infrastructure

Malaysia, especially KL and the Klang Valley, has a growing independent scene of bars, cafes and mixed-use venues and alternative spaces. This is a fast-moving scene. Venues have sprung up across the capital for live house and open-mic performances. For example:

- Jazz: Alexis, Mezze, Suzie Wong's
- Indie music: The Bee, Gaslight Café, Merdeka
- Punk: Rumah Api, Tandang Record Store

- Hip pop: Joe's Barbershop
- Mixed musical entertainments: Bobo KL, Theatre Lounge Café
- Creative hubs: RXKL, 35@Jetty, Safehouse KL, The Philla, 90 Degrees Café & Art

For further information on performing arts venue and creative music hubs, see the Creative Hub Malaysia website: <https://creativehubs.my>.

²²¹ <https://jazzborneo.com/about>

5 Movers and Shakers – a sample

Singer-songwriter **Yuna**, who started her career in the underground music scene in Kuala Lumpur, has collaborated with international pop music stars such as Pharrell Williams and Usher since her relocation to the US.²²²

Dubbed as the ‘godfather of Malaysian rap’²²³, musician **Joe Flizzow**, started out as a member of the award-winning Malaysian hip-hop duo, Too Phat, with Malique Ibrahim. Flizzow’s personality power made the list of Tatler’s 2020 The New Asia list in its Malaysian edition²²⁴, followed swiss watch-maker Hublot’s announcement of appointing him as first Friend of the Brand of Malaysia. Flizzow is the managing director of Def Jam Recordings Southeast Asia.

In his ambition to lead the way for ‘Cina Music’, **Dato’ Maw** raps in multiple tongues – Mandarin, Cantonese, Malay, the Penang Hokkien dialect and English – alongside an infusion of local slang.²²⁵ He also runs an indie label Ban Huat Sdn. Bhd – which promotes Malay-Chinese hip-pop music.

Project Ranih is an online archive launched by **Alena Murang** to collect folksongs and lullabies of Kelabit children in Sarawak.²²⁶ It was partially funded by the Foundation of Endangered Language, a non-profit organisation in the UK.²²⁷

The Ricecooker Archives – Southeast Asian Rock’n’Roll Treasury²²⁸ is the ‘afterlife’ of a former record store by punk rock lifer **Joe Kidd** in 2016. It is now a library/museum/archive, based at The Zhongshan Building.

The Wknd Sessions is a Malaysian music and talk show YouTube series created by **Fikri Fadzil**. The program features live music performances and interviews of artists from Southeast Asia.²²⁹

Malaysia’s Music Talent and Global Films

The country has a strong base of musical talent working in the film industry. From indie films, to big-budget Hollywood or regional streaming productions, they play a vital role in providing content and at times offering a distinctively Malaysian feel. For example:

Rendra Zawawi, is a Los Angeles-based composer, musician and songwriter who had numerous accolades under his belt, winning Golden Horse Award for Best Original Film Song (2016). He has worked on international scoring for TV series such as *American Crime Story* and *American Horror Story* in the US; and *M for Malaysia*, the official Malaysian entry for Best International Feature Film at the 2020 Oscars.²³⁰

Born in Sarawak, **Alvin Wee** is a musician and composer who made his mark in Hollywood with the score of *Kung Fu Panda 3*, *Kingsman: The Golden Circle* and *Mulan*. He is also working on sound mixing for the next James Bond movie and the *Top Gun* sequel.

An example of the talented Gen T in Malaysia, **Zee Avi** is a songwriter and guitarist who has a successful stable of self-released titles on YouTube. She won her breakout international award with Best Original Film Song at the 53rd Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival in 2016 – for ‘*Arena Cahaya*’, the theme song she co-wrote and performed for one of Malaysia’s highest grossing films of all time, *Ola Bola*.

²²² <https://rojakdaily.com/entertainment/article/1590/did-you-know-that-malaysians-worked-on-these-hollywood-movies-tv-shows>

²²³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-55145607>

²²⁴ <https://my.asiatatler.com/society/the-new-asia-portfolio-style-influence-power>

²²⁵ <https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/entertainment/article/3118760/malaysian-chinese-hip-hop-given-voice-rapper-dato-maw>

²²⁶ <http://www.projectranih.com>

²²⁷ <https://www.thestar.com.my/lifestyle/culture/2020/11/23/alena-murang-launches-virtual-platform-project-ranih-to-archive-kelabit-folk-songs>

²²⁸ <https://thericecookershop.com>

²²⁹ <http://www.the-wknd.com>

²³⁰ https://www.imdb.com/name/nm7393386/bio?ref_=nm_ov_bio_sm

Behind the scenes at one of The Wknd Sessions’ recordings.

Photo © Bryan Chang



Sample Opportunities for UK Collaboration and Participation



Post-Covid, Malaysia is likely to have one of the fastest moving and dynamic music sectors in the region. Its large and increasing domestic market, coupled with its excellent infrastructure and digital capacity, mean the music industry has plenty of room for growth. For the UK, this will facilitate a set of opportunities: for trade, collaboration and talent development/showcasing. Key opportunity areas include:

- **'Live' performance:** Malaysia has the potential to be a major hub for any regional touring. With a strong network of promoters, venues and good technical/backstage support, Malaysia provides a relatively soft landing in the ASEAN context. This is likely to focus on Kuala Lumpur, but regional cities such as George Town and Johor have a growing audience for contemporary music of different genres. In addition, the country's festival sector provides opportunities to 'test' the Malaysian market and explore wider connections.
- **Residencies:** Festivals such as the Rainforest Music Festival or cross-art-form festivals such as the George Town Festival, provide the platforms for artist residencies. Opportunities for UK talent to take residencies in Malaysia are perhaps under-explored for contemporary music. The UK's diverse music sector could build new resonance with local audiences and provide for exchange with, for example, Malaysian hip hop.
- **Expertise:** The Malaysian music industry has variously developed over recent years, with improvements to the regulatory landscape, licencing and collecting. The sector could benefit from additional expertise from the UK in developing a higher value music industry – e.g. for export. Malaysian music export is significantly under-leveraged given the potential of Malaysian acts to lead the country's creative economy. Precedents such as South Korea's K-Pop suggest what is possible.
- **Music Education:** The Malaysian music sector lacks specialised music education, especially at school age. The UK has a strong track record in this field and could support Malaysia to develop a more coordinated and embedded talent pipeline, as well as to deliver the wider social and cultural benefits that a strong music education offers.
- **Digital/Film/Games:** Malaysia is a hotbed of digital music talent, much of which is flourishing in other creative sectors such as film and games. These sectors offer market potential for the UK music industry, as well as access to talent for the UK film industry. Opportunities to broker collaboration between UK and Malaysian creative firms would be welcome in both countries.

Additional Resources

- CENDANA independent music map:
<https://www.cendana.com.my/our-activities/our-activities/independent-music-ecosystem-map>
- British Council Creative Hubs Malaysia search engine:
https://creativehubs.my/hub_category/music

Chapter 6: Visual Arts

In collaboration with Dr Ann Lee,
PhD Southeast Asia Studies (NUS)

1

Sector Profile

This chapter focuses on craft and contemporary art – from education through to presentation – as provided by selected public and private sector bodies, organisations and individuals in Malaysia. Where possible, the chapter will highlight work in the two Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak on Borneo. This is partly due to processes of digitalisation which are opening up access to and generating markets for the visual arts and crafts beyond Peninsular Malaysia. It is also because these regions provide a compelling opportunity landscape for international exchange, especially for artists and arts organisations keen to connect visual culture to social and environmental agendas; or for those keen to explore different elements of Malaysia's diverse population.



One manifestation of the Malaysian cultural melting pot and local ingenuity is the fusion of elements from Malay, Chinese and Islamic traditions seen in the Melaka Terenggera mosque with its nusantara (regional) roof, Chinese-style minaret, and Islamic decorative motifs and Malay woodcarving in the pierced panels interpenetrating its spaces.

Syed Ahmad Jamal, late National Laureate²³¹

²³¹ P.7, Syed Ahmad Jamal, *Crafts and The Visual Arts* (Archipelago Press, 2007).

Diversity remains a core strength of the visual arts in Malaysia. At least 2,000 years of indigenous and international influences have meant constant refashioning and reshaping via influences from the Middle and Near East, within Southeast Asia, and from almost all major Asian religions and ways of faith: animistic traditions, Hindusim, Buddhism, Chinese folk religions, and Islam.

There are 13 states in Malaysia, comprising both Peninsular Malaysia and Borneo, and each with its own capital and market centres including Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Ipoh, Kota Kinabalu and Kuching. It remains helpful to think of two main 'Easts' in Malaysia that reflect the spectrum of diversity of culture across the country. In East Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak) on Borneo, the areas are distinct in their significant population of indigenous groups with Christian and animistic traditions, where alcohol-based drinks are a popular aspect of harvest celebration.

Whereas in the East coast of Peninsular Malaysia (Kelantan and Terengganu), the state government is formed by political party PAS (the Islamic Party of Malaysia) and has instituted selective bans on the arts with 'guidelines' for organisers – e.g. that audiences must be seated according to gender.

Malaysia's First Pavilion was Included in the 2019 Venice Biennale



In 2019, Malaysia had its first national pavilion at La Biennale di Venezia (widely known as the Venice Biennale) – the world's oldest biennale held every other year since 1895.

The national Malaysia pavilion at Venice Biennial 2019 was commissioned and organised by Professor Dato' Dr. Mohamed Najib Dawa, Director General of Balai Seni Negara (National Art Gallery of Malaysia) and the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture of Malaysia.²³²

The inaugural showcase was curated by gallerist Lim Wei-Ling and associate curator, Gowri Balasegaram, and featured the work of four male artists – Anurendra Jegadeva, H.H. Lim, Ivan Lam, and Zulkifli Yusoff.²³³ The exhibition titled *Holding Up A Mirror*, was described as a 'discourse on the concept of identity within the larger context of society at a time of immense political, social and economic change.'²³⁴ It was sponsored by the Creador Foundation, BRDB Developments and Big Tree.

²³² <https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2019/national-participations/malaysia>

²³³ <https://www.optiontheedge.com/topic/culture/how-malaysia-got-its-first-pavilion-la-biennale-venice>

²³⁴ <https://www.thestar.com.my/lifestyle/culture/2019/04/03/malaysia-pavilion-venice-art-biennale-hh-lim-ivan-lam-zulkifli-yusoff-anurendra-jegadeva>

Craft and Visual Arts Convergence

In Malaysia, visual arts and craft have emerged as expressive forms in a context of significant cultural diversity, and both are undergoing a process of change and renewal, influenced by societal and technological changes. Together, they form a remarkable cultural asset base for Malaysia and one which can provide deeply inspiring opportunities for collaboration, engagement and shared learning.

Despite sometimes being described as too 'fractured', unlike other countries in Southeast Asia such as Thailand or the Philippines which may appear more culturally homogeneous, the diversity of Malaysia's visual heritage is its principal asset. The manifestation mentioned by Syed Ahmad Jamal is well known within Peninsular Malaysia but it is only one of very many kinds that exist in the country. The retention and development of art and craft traditions from the country's diverse regions, including the contribution of Sabah and Sarawak is vital to see innovation, expression and technique develop and fully reflect the country's diverse cultural mosaic.

Modern Urgencies

In today's context, it is vital to connect agendas in visual arts and crafts development to a range of social and environmental concerns, not least the preservation and protection of a diversity of cultural expressions. In Malaysia, socially engaged and inclusive practice is growing in prominence. For example:

- How craft and craftsmanship are an intangible heritage that consolidates social cohesion and local wisdom
- Keeping intact local identities and connections with the environment
- Providing marginalised communities with business opportunities (innovative social business and sustainable development)
- Advancing gender inclusion and promoting social justice
- Creative place-making

What is Craft?



The late, much-respected advocate of cultural heritage, also a renowned Abstract Expressionist painter, Syed Ahmad Jamal, saw Craft according a scheme that can be summarised as follows:

- Pottery and Earthenware
- Woodcraft and Carving
- Plaiting and Basketware
- Textiles and Embroidery
- Metalware
- Recreational and Ceremonial Crafts

In Malaysia, the challenge is to attract a younger generation to maintain and innovate craft traditions in a sustainable way, both economic and environmental. The ways in which crafts and the visual arts can be preserved today include seeing them in terms of industry, wellbeing, innovation, heritage and national identity-building. This may be seen as a tall order, with factors such as the cost or access to raw materials and the need for upscaling of production, which require considerable cultural and education investment. However, important steps have been made and examples of sustainable development are ongoing.

Education

Besides the typical apprenticeship method of learning, the country's main formal craft educational institution is Institut Kraf Negara (IKN) which offers a range of diploma and degree courses in craft work. Collaboration and knowledge-sharing has occurred with UK-based art educational institutions, and there is considerable scope to explore future collaborations which connect traditional craft and visual culture to contemporary markets, innovation and social/ environmental agendas.

Millennial Revival in Kelantan

Kelantan is best known as the cradle of Malay civilisation. It possesses a unique native dialect that can be hard to understand even for people who can speak Malay and it is the birthplace of many traditional arts in Malaysia, from giant kites to intricate textiles, performance art and traditional games.²³⁵ As craft making struggles for popularity and relevance among youngsters, a new generation of torch bearers are carrying the heritage forward, with a contemporary touch that connects historic crafts to contemporary design, fashion and art. For example:

- **Nik Faiz Nik Amin, founder of Gahara and president of Malaysian Craft Council (MCC)**

Gahara was established in 2007 by architect-turned-artist Nik Faiz Nik Amin, a third-generation batik artisan based in Penampang, Kelantan. It is one of the leading premium batik textile producers in Malaysia under the label Ruzzgahara. It specialises in block printing and is known for its unique techniques ranging from tie-dye to shibori. Its production and creative hubs are based in Kota Bharu, Kelantan and is known as Rumah Gahara. In Kuala Lumpur, Gahara is based at the BoutiqueCafe, located at the National Textile Museum.²³⁶ Nik Faiz also founded the Malaysian Craft Council or Pertubuhan Kraf Malaysia in 2019. The non-profit membership organisation was set up to promote an international interest for the Malaysian craft industry – for the people, by the people.²³⁷

- **Nik Nur Amalina²³⁸, Kelingkan Kelantan**

Nik Nur Amalina is a young embroiderer, promoting the traditional embroidery known as Kelingkan. Kelingkan embroidery is a traditional Malay embroidery technique that employs a flat metallic ribbon or plate coated with a gold or silver colour.²³⁹

- **Amir Harith bin Mat Kashim (Bujin), CEO of Bujin's Batik**

Amir Harith bin Mat Kashim, also known as Bujin is the CEO and master craftman of KB batik brand, Bujin's Batik. Promoting and preserving cultural heritage, Bujin has won the Piala Seri Endon (PSE) in Fashion Category in 2012 and is the first batik maker to be awarded the Golden Hand Award by the Prime Minister of Malaysia in 2009. Bujin also founded a batik gallery in Bukit Bintang, Kuala Lumpur that showcases an exclusive batik collection as well as the Bujin Academy to educate rural communities and their youth about the crafts and process of batik making.

Batik painting during RIUH at Sentul Depot.

Photo © RIUH

²³⁵ Kelantan: The Real Cradle of Malay Heritage Few Know About. <https://www.lokalocal.com/blog/local-story/kelantan-malay-heritage>

²³⁶ Gahara. <https://www.gahara.my>

²³⁷ Malaysian Craft Council. <https://www.facebook.com/malaysiancraftcouncil>

²³⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/kelingkan>

²³⁹ <https://encyclocraftsapr.com/kelingkan-malay>





A steady process of advancement has turned Malaysian art into a dynamic and ever more intriguing field, necessitating artists to take a more critical stance not only towards art but also towards their experience of life in general.

Nur Hanim Khairuddin and Beverly Yong²⁴⁰

Contemporary Art – Digitalisation in a Time of Crisis

- Of the contemporary art market, estimates show Malaysian annual transaction value to be a tiny fraction of the global art market estimated at RM200 billion.²⁴¹ However, during the pandemic, recent art auctions have seen notable activity – mostly of smaller works by established artists.
- Annual transaction value understood to be below RM5 million (£853,600)
- In a recent Henry Butcher auction (March 2021), smaller works by established artists were sold for RM2.2 million (£375,190) via online bidding. This was mainly due to three works by established artists being put up for sale by collectors.

When compared to performing arts, which has required significant physical infrastructure for its development, visual arts stakeholders in Malaysia appear to have adapted more easily to the digital reality accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Many artists have taken individual initiative to place their work on digital platforms, in theory so making their work more accessible. But they do not typically have the marketing or intermediary support to tell stories about Malaysian art, and the country lacks shared development platforms for its visual arts.

²⁴⁰ Reactions-New Critical Strategies Vol 2 (RogueArt, 2013).

²⁴¹ <https://themalaysianreserve.com/2017/10/13/malaysia-lagging-behind-global-art-market>

Yet the pace of digital development in the visual arts is unequal, with an emerging 'digital divide; between, broadly, younger artists and an older generation of practitioners. 'Old habits of viewing die hard' even as galleries have had to close in the name of pandemic standard operating procedures (SOPs). Government initiatives have been put in place to provide relief and re-orientate to the growing appeal of digital consumption.

- For the Creative Industries, the Government's PENJANA Short-Term Economic Recovery Plan presents a range of recovery initiatives to reboot the arts and cultural sector, administered and managed by MyCreative Ventures and CENDANA and supervised by Ministry of Communications and Multimedia. RM10 million is dedicated to performing arts, visual arts, independent music and the craft sector.²⁴² It features grants that encourages digital marketing, promotion, exhibition and creation. Its programme includes five new initiatives (arts organisation resilience funding programme, arts venue recovery programme, performing arts presentation funding programme, CENDANA crafts industry choice, art in the city public art commission programme), alongside enhancement of existing funding programmes (independent music, visual arts showcase, visual arts inspire – research and excursion, Create Now, Artists in school, ACE workshop by the Arts Sector.)
- Looking beyond short-term relief, the government has issued its ambitious Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint which aims to catapult the country into 'a digitally-driven, high income nation and a regional leader in digital economy.'²⁴³ It has a dedicated sub-sectoral focus on art, entertainment and recreation.

At the time of writing, the country's main public and private galleries are closed until mid or end 2021. Exhibitions have been cancelled or postponed. In response to this, several major galleries have taken to recreating their physical space in 360-degree lookalike renditions with virtual exhibitions. This may be said to count as a 'first phase' of digital engagement. After all, even before Covid-19, galleries were providing 'online presence' as supplementary to the real thing of physically visiting the gallery. New technologies and apps are now being explored as part of a welcome development to create new ways of viewing and experiencing art online. The examples below became part catalyst for wider access and representation through digital enablement.

- Balai Seni Negara (the National Art Gallery)²⁴⁴, Petronas Gallery (after the country's state oil and gas corporation)²⁴⁵ and Maybank Gallery.
- Special projects such as Maybank Gallery²⁴⁶ (after a leading financial group and pioneer national collector) and its exhibitions 'NAFAS' (Breathe): Maybank's Emerging Women Artists Exhibition²⁴⁷ and *Semangat (Spirit): Non-figurative works, Volume 1* from the gallery's collection; curated as part of the gallery's 60th anniversary in 2020 and featuring 600 works of art and sculptures, most of which had not been seen in public before.

²⁴² <http://www.mycreative.com.my/penjana>

²⁴³ p.10, Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint, 2021.

²⁴⁴ https://www.artgallery.gov.my/?page_id=15

²⁴⁵ <https://www.petronas.com/galeri-petronas>

²⁴⁶ <https://www.maybankfoundation.com/index.php/our-impact/balai-seni-art-series>

²⁴⁷ <https://www.maybankfoundation.com/mbfvr/nafas>

Developing Collaboration Through Discourse



During the pandemic, artists have recounted that working from home has meant engaging in more online discussions such as via Zoom and Google Meet. These methods of connection have

facilitated comfort, hope and indeed inspiration (though notably for some, also 'interpretative labour' and 'zoom fatigue').



When you cannot travel, cross-national collaboration is even more important. To me, the exchange of knowledge and thought is more important than producing art work at this time.

Tan Zi Hao, Artist

For example, Tan Zi Hao, artist, educator and writer has engaged in conversation with artists from Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand and Taiwan, about the meanings and references to 'Southeast Asia'. He did eventually create a mythical

composite creature of Nusantara (an ancient name for the Southeast Asian region) based on colleagues' suggestions.²⁴⁸ He also joined the Moon Salt workshop for the Taipei Biennial in Taiwan.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁸ <https://www.heath.tw/nml-article/creaturely-conjectures>

²⁴⁹ https://www.taipeibiennial.org/2020/en-US/Project/Project_Content/4?type=moon

2 The Visual Arts Ecosystem

The capital city, Kuala Lumpur, and its wider environs, the Klang Valley, have operated as the centre of Malaysia's art ecosystem – at least since Independence from British colonial government in 1957 and upon the agreement of former British 'crown colonies' on Borneo – namely, Sabah and Sarawak – to form Malaysia. The latter two states on Borneo have begun to take up a larger presence within the national mindset, and Covid-19's impact on advancing digital engagement has made for the beginning of important, more inclusive shifts across the visual arts value chain.²⁵⁰

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Digital humanities is an important area. We need artists exposed to more cultural resources, to make more interesting connections. Noticeably, there's a chasm between younger people, artists, who are so technologically savvy, and a group that has no clue at all. We need to talk more about this.

Simon Soon, Art historian and educator

²⁵⁰ Klang Valley Visual Arts Map, Cultural Economy Development Agency (CENDANA) <https://www.cendana.com.my/our-activities/our-activities/visual-arts-ecosystem-map>

Art Education

Over 15 colleges and universities in Malaysia provide diploma, undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in art and arts-related subjects. Among the reputable international universities, colleges and schools, is the country's oldest university, the University of Malaya²⁵¹, and one of the youngest, Limkokwing University College of Creative Technology²⁵², named after the self-made advertising guru whose father was a sign painter. The Malaysian Institute of Art (better known as MIA)²⁵³ holds a special place for being the incubator of several bright lights in each generation of Malaysian artists. Multimedia University (MMU) is a favourite for those with digital talent, while The One Academy has seen several outstanding graduate students go on to have successful domestic and international careers.

Artist Associations

Over 10 artist associations have their main offices in the capital, KL, representing a diverse range of artists from comic illustrators/artists to water-colourists and oil painters from across the country. These include:

- Cao Tang Men Eastern Art Society
- Gabungan Persatuan Pelukis SeMalaysia (GAPS)
- Malaysian Artists Society/Persatuan Pelukis Malaysia (PPM)
- Persatuan Seni Rupa Malaysia (PeRUPA)
- Women Artists Malaysia (WAM!)

Sime Darby Foundation's 'Imagine the Impossible'



An opportunity for college/university students to contribute fresh ideas in the area of light art occurred for the first time four months before the pandemic lockdown kicked in. Malaysia's first interactive light art exhibition – *iNYALA* – was held as a month-long exhibition at the REXKL venue in central Kuala Lumpur. *iNYALA*²⁵⁴ celebrated 'the interconnectedness of creativity and innovation, bringing imagination to possibilities through

immersive art, technology and visual-sensory experiences.'

With the slogan 'Imagine the Impossible', *iNYALA* featured 9 art installations by students and 3 by industry professionals. The project helped transform creative hub REXKL²⁵⁵ into a digital park 'inspired by nature in urban living'. More than 8,000 visitors attended the month-long exhibition.

Showcases and Exhibitions

There are some 25 public and private galleries, including national/state owned, corporate galleries and university galleries in Kuala Lumpur. Most provide free entry. In addition to the galleries already mentioned, the following list highlights a wider range. The country has a robust and growing scene where private and public galleries with exhibition programming and representing artists, and showroom galleries that operate on walk-in sales.

Art Galleries and Museums with a Socio-educational Focus

These cultural institutions are significant providers of a range of socio-educational services including acquisition, conservation and collection care, research and publishing, exhibition presentation, awareness building and advocacy, education and outreach. These organisations are open to international partnership for education, social engagement and exchange activities.

²⁵¹ <https://um.edu.my>

²⁵² <https://limkokwing.net>

²⁵³ <https://mia.edu.my>

²⁵⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=3171264389555589>

²⁵⁵ <https://www.rexkl.com>

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We are not interested in just selling art. We are interested in understanding. We invested a lot of time to develop ties with a local school, around art education, but it wasn't easy. We feel art education in schools needs national support, and we would be happy to play our part.

Joseph Lim, A+ Gallery

Badan Warisan Malaysia²⁵⁶ is the national heritage and conservation services NGO, founded over 30 years ago.

Bank Negara Malaysia Museum and Art Gallery²⁵⁷ is the country's Central Bank Museum and Art Gallery.

Galeri Kesenian dan Kebudayaan Malaysia²⁵⁸ is owned and run by the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism.

Galeri Shah Alam²⁵⁹ is located outside Kuala Lumpur, in neighbouring Shah Alam, Selangor. This gallery was founded in 1991 by the former Sultan of the state.

Galeri Tenaga is owned and run by the country's national electricity company.

Islamic Art Museum²⁶⁰ is owned by business magnate, Syed Mohamad Albukhary.

Ilham Gallery²⁶¹ is a privately-owned public art gallery in Kuala Lumpur, 'committed to supporting the development, understanding and enjoyment of Malaysian modern and contemporary art within a regional and global context'. Despite its youth, it appeals to a diverse audience and is one of the few with a serious focus on children's outreach programmes. Its exhibitions and public programmes 'seek to bring people into closer contact with the art, the artists and their ideas.'

A children's outreach programme in session at Ilham Gallery.

Photo © Ilham Gallery

²⁵⁶ <https://badanwarisanmalaysia.org>

²⁵⁷ <https://www.museumbnm.gov.my>

²⁵⁸ <http://motac.gov.my>

²⁵⁹ <https://galerishahalam.com>

²⁶⁰ <https://iamm.org.my>

²⁶¹ <https://ilhamgallery.com>



Muzium Negara (The National Museum)²⁶² is responsible for the restoration and preservations of the nation's heritage. Its construction and programming represent a state-sanctioned national identity and narratives.

Oriental Art & Cultural Center (OACC)²⁶³ is funded by the Elken Foundation – a nonprofit dedicated to the promotion and appreciation of Malaysian art.

Sasaran Art Centre²⁶⁴ is named after a small town and provides gallery space and a writers' residency programme, among other activities.

Founded in 2005, **Richard Koh Fine Art**²⁶⁵ has gallery spaces in Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok and Singapore. With a practice that centres on developing an artist's career, it is committed to the promotion of Southeast

Asian contemporary art on regional and international platforms. It is among one of the most influential commercial galleries in the region and frequently presents in premier regional contemporary art fairs such as S.E.A Focus in Singapore, Art Basel Hong Kong, Taipei Dangai and West Bund in Shanghai.

Percha Art Space²⁶⁶ founded in 2009, offers an alternative venue for the local public and visitors to view modern and contemporary art from Malaysia. Percha functions as a creative arts hub to stimulate artistic activities in the district of Manjung, Perak. Art exhibitions and public programmes are often held in its independent gallery, located in the row of shops at the Lumut Centre of Crafts (Pusat Kraf Lumut), Lumut Jetty Terminal.

Advancing Digital – Portrait of a Gallery's Audience Outreach During a Pandemic



The **Ilham Gallery** is a privately-owned gallery, open to the public. During the first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic, it put in place new digital engagement initiatives. It did not just 'post' one-way video content, such as artist interviews, curatorial tours and other public programmes on its social media sites but looked to increase 'engagement' with its audiences and stakeholders.

- **Ilham Cribs** – a series that highlighted young, emerging artists in their studios, working from home (artists were also paid a fee as a way to help subsidise their living costs)
- **'Homebody' Art Contest**, conducted for children (being all homebound due to the pandemic)
- **'Art Takeovers'** – this project enabled selected contemporary artists to use the Gallery's social media to curate their preferred themes and works. Artists were invited to do an Instagram 'take over' every weekend during the lockdown

period to share their work and practice. The 'takeovers' gave artists an opportunity to share their works with a larger public audience, and enabled the Gallery's social media audience numbers to increase. (Each artist brought their own fan base, which accounted for a total 20% increase of followers on Instagram.)

The Gallery has three Facebook pages (ILHAM Gallery, ILHAM Gift Shop, and ILHAM Kids and Families) and two Instagram accounts (ILHAM Gallery, ILHAM Gift Shop). Its following, according to the Gallery, includes over 26,000 people across Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter and has a cumulative reach across all platforms of over two million people.

It was also one of the top two museums in Malaysia geotagged by Instagram users in 2020. The Gallery's Instagram interactions grew by 295% over the year and its YouTube channel was also more successful with over 100% increase in views.

²⁶² <http://www.muziumnegara.gov.my>

²⁶³ <https://oacc.my>

²⁶⁴ <https://sasaranarts.org.my>

²⁶⁵ <https://rkfineart.com/about>

²⁶⁶ <https://percha-artspace.business.site>

Festivals and Biennials

Festivals and biennials are recurring events where new works are commissioned, emerging artists breakout, mid-career artists ascending to international recognition. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, events have been cancelled, or postponed for the time being. However, Malaysia has a burgeoning creative and events scene and the visual arts are playing a prominent role in creative platforms and marketplaces. Malaysia also has a growing market for contemporary visual arts, with the following platforms providing a relatively 'soft landing' for international artists looking to build their profile in Malaysia and the wider ASEAN region.

Kuala Lumpur Biennale is a 'mega-scale international contemporary art programme organised by the National Arts Gallery of Malaysia.'²⁶⁷ Its inaugural show took place in 2017, pivoted to the interdisciplinary nature of contemporary art and brought together practitioners including art activists, environmentalists, scientists, to name a few. Two artists withdrew their participation due to censorship and unauthorised seizure of their works by the authority.²⁶⁸ The 2020 edition was cancelled due to Covid-19.

DiverseCity: KL International Arts Festival²⁶⁹ is a multi-disciplinary annual festival, founded in 2015. Produced by DiverseCity, a non-profit organisation that advocates, develops and invests in artistic and cultural experiences to empower, the festival has a visual arts (including craft) pillar in addition to drama, music, dance and literature.

Kuala Lumpur Experimental Film, Video & Music Festival (KLEX)²⁷⁰ is an artist-run grassroots international festival, established in 2010. Video art is one of the key focus areas.

Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur (GWKL)²⁷¹ is a non-profit, annual cultural marquee, presented in the last quarter of each year. The event was founded in 2016 by cultural pioneer, Datin Shalini Ganendra, the Director of Shalini Ganendra Advisory.²⁷²

Kuala Lumpur Photography Festival (KLPPF)²⁷³ is one of the largest and oldest photography events in the country founded in 1997. Since 2010, the KLPPF Photo-creator of the Year Award, a biennial event has been set up to recognise and promote emerging photographers from Malaysia. Since 2012, the travel section has been given more prominence with dedication to travel, that is, the (FITE) Free Independent Travel Exchange. Packed with interactive programs, the FITE is the platform for travel industry operators/organisations to engage with travellers. Both KLPPF and FITE are free for the public.

A performance during
Yayasan Sime Darby Arts
Festival.

Photo © Yayasan Sime Darby Arts Festival



²⁶⁷ <https://www.biennialfoundation.org/biennials/kuala-lumpur-biennale-malaysia>

²⁶⁸ <https://www.artforum.com/news/artists-withdraw-from-inaugural-kuala-lumpur-biennale-72483>

²⁶⁹ <https://www.diversecity.my/about-kliaf>

²⁷⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/klxfest>

²⁷¹ <http://www.gw-kl.com>

²⁷² <http://www.shaliniganendra.com>

²⁷³ <https://klpf.com.my>

OBSCURA Festival of Photography²⁷⁴ is held during the annual George Town Festival based in the UNESCO World Heritage City of George Town, Penang.

RIUH in the City²⁷⁵ is a creative bazaar occurring on one weekend every other month. The RIUH team curates a variety of pop-up stores & food, creative workshops, installations, showcases and live performances.

Sasaran International Art Festival/Art Exhibition and the residency programme organised by Sasaran Arts Association²⁷⁶ has been a force behind active cultural exchange among SEA artists, and where the harmonious tradition and lifestyles of the Selangor fishing village is championed.

Selangor Creative Arts Movement (SCREAM), a nonprofit working with youth capacity building, runs a flagship programme, titled Buka Pentas²⁷⁷ that aims to promote and discover new artists

Initiated in 2014, **Yayasan Sime Darby Arts Festival (YSDAF)**²⁷⁸ is the largest free-for-all arts festival in Malaysia. Presented by Yayasan Sime Darby (Sime Darby Foundation) and The Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre (klpac), it is an event that takes place every other year. The festival features local creative talent with a wide variety of what the local arts scene can offer from the traditional to the contemporary, dance to theatre, mainstream to the experimental. Inclusive in its programming, the festival has a diverse line up including under-served communities. To better serve its mission, the festival staff have received Disability Equality Training (DET) and Disability-Related Services Training (DRST).

What About Kuching (WAK)²⁷⁹ founded in 2017 is organised by About Kuching Sdn Bhd. WAK is a community-driven festival that celebrates arts, culture and lifestyles. It is a month-long event filled with many activities such as comedy shows, music performances and Chinese opera.

²⁷⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/obscurafestival>

²⁷⁵ <https://www.riuh.com.my>

²⁷⁶ <http://www.sasaranarts.org.my>

²⁷⁷ <https://scream.com.my/buka-pentas>

²⁷⁸ <https://ysdartsfestival.com.my/about>

²⁷⁹ WAK 2019 promises exciting events throughout the city in October. <https://dayakdaily.com/wak-2019-promises-exciting-events-throughout-the-city-in-october>. Official website: <https://aboutkuching.com/about-wak>

Ipoh International Art Festival – Inviting International Collaboration



Organised by PORT Ipoh and Tourism Perak, the **Ipoh International Art Festival** aims to position the city of Ipoh as a place for creative exchange, production and innovation. The festival is being developed as a 'signature' festival for domestic and international artists, tourists, art lovers, cultural researchers and art collectors.

The first festival was held in 2019 and involved more than a hundred arts practitioners from across the country, as well as artists from more than ten countries, namely Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Philippine, Myanmar, Denmark, Italy,

Switzerland, Finland, Turkey, Austria, Lebanon, Sweden and Syria.

The festival offered many programmes and events such as art exhibitions and workshops, an art bazaar, film screenings and many more.²⁸⁰ The inaugural Ipoh International Art Festival (IIAF 2019)²⁸¹ presented its showcase under the theme, CLIMATE, prioritising works that incorporate recycle/upcycle materials as support to the eco-tourism of Perak. The second edition is scheduled to be held in December 2021.²⁸²



The Ipoh International Art Festival... [is] fully sponsored by the Perak State government via PORT, can be seen as a benchmark for making Ipoh an important city for world class arts and culture festivals. What we need is to grow arts appreciation in the public realm by holding regular festival events, symposiums, residencies and workshops. Ipoh also needs more arts centres such as galleries, black box venues to hold small and medium performances, resource centres or archives dedicated to the visual arts, music and performance arts, both traditional and contemporary... In addition, we need to increase the publication of books on arts and culture, artists' directories and journals for documentation and education purposes.

**Nur Hanim Dato' Mohamed Khairuddin, curator and artist,
General Manager PORT**

²⁸⁰ Ipoh International Art Festival 2019. <https://www.portipoh.com.my/phone/ipoh-international-art-festival.html>

²⁸¹ <https://www.portipoh.com.my/phone/ipoh-international-art-festival.html>

²⁸² Ipoh International Art Festival 2021 Pre-Fest. <https://www.jfkl.org.my/events/iaf2021prefest>

Art Market – Auctions and Art Fairs

Henry Butcher Art Auctioneers (part of the Henry Butcher assets management group) and **KLAS Art** are among the specialist auction houses that have held online auctions during the pandemic.²⁸³

Art Expo Malaysia (AEM)²⁸⁴ is an annual tradeshow at MATRADE Exhibition and Convention Centre (MECC) Kuala Lumpur. It was established by co-founder Sim Pojinn.

Various artists have taken the initiative to showcase their work online²⁸⁵ but also as a group. **PERUPA**²⁸⁶ is a platform linked to the artists association, whereas **artmarketmalaysia**,²⁸⁷ founded by artist Hazrita Mohd Hatta, represents an estimated 100 artists.

Private Collectors and Cultural Philanthropy

Other than institutional players, the number of domestic and international individual collectors has grown within the last decade. Among the most well-known are **Aliya and Farouk Khan** whose **AFK Collection** comprises over 1,000 artworks by more than 100 Malaysian artists.²⁸⁸

- The holdings are a mirror that charts the development of Malaysia contemporary art since the 1980s. Its research and exhibition initiatives proactively build awareness and knowledge of the country's contemporary art – both domestically and internationally.

Even as many collectors prefer to remain private, some are playing a more prominent role in the national 'arts debate'. For example, controversy emerged at the recent Balai Seni Visual Negara (National Art Gallery) whereby a mid-career exhibition of 30 years of work by visual artist Ahmad Fuad Osman saw several of his works removed by the Gallery's management without explanation. Various private collectors voiced their opposition to the censorship. Pakharuddin Sulaiman, for example, had loaned five works for the exhibition. He asked for the pieces to be taken down and returned. (The exhibition was entitled '*At the End of the Day Even Art is Not Important*', 2020).²⁸⁹

²⁸³ <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2020/03/574859/henry-butcher-art-auction-collects-rm22m-4-hours#:~:text=2m%20in%204%20hours,-By%20Esther%20Landau&text=KUALA%20LUMPUR%3A%20A%20total%20of,and%20the%20Covid%2D19%20pandemic>

²⁸⁴ <https://artexpomalaysia.com/homepage>

²⁸⁵ <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/highlight/2020/10/26/online-art-market-helps-aspiring-artists-sell-their-work>

²⁸⁶ <http://www.perupamalaysia.blogspot.com>

²⁸⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/artmarketmalaysia/shop>

²⁸⁸ <http://www.afkcollection.com>

²⁸⁹ <https://pluralartmag.com/2020/02/13/censorship-at-the-balai-seni-negara-ahmad-fuad-osman-and-the-case-of-the-disappearing-art>

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The AFK Collection is a collection of the first generation of Malaysian contemporary artists, representing the early development of Malaysia's contemporary art movement... [T]he collection is dedicated to the acquisition, preservation and documentation of those artworks that mark the beginning of the growth of a contemporary art movement in Malaysia. Critical in quality, encompassing all genres, mediums and forms of art that have been produced from 1980 to present day, this collection is recognised as a watershed moment for contemporary art both in Malaysia and the wider region of Southeast Asia.

AFK Collection²⁹⁰

²⁹⁰ <https://www.afkcollection.com/about>

Prizes and Awards

A range of art prizes and competitions exist to identify and encourage new talent, where private organisations and corporations play an influential role in cultivating and recognising the country's emerging talent.

Kuala Lumpur International Photoawards (KLPA)²⁹¹ is a prestigious annual global prize, initiated in 2009. It is awarded for portrait photography, and is the only prominent photography contest based in Southeast Asia.

Malaysian Emerging Artist Award (MEA)²⁹² is a biennial competition award that recognises the most promising emerging talents in Malaysia. This enabling award is organised by HOM Art Trans²⁹³, a privately owned, artist-owned and run art space. The award has become an influential industry and regional event to spot and celebrate up-and-coming talent.

MyCreative Ventures Visual Art Pitch²⁹⁴ is run by the government creative investment arm, MyCreative Ventures. It is open to various kinds of art work (painting, drawing, sculpture and photography) and positioned to showcase talent and affirm the significance of creative expression as a career path.

MyTiger Values Art Competition²⁹⁵ is a design competition for students from public and private institutions of higher learning in Malaysia, sponsored by Maybank, one of the country's largest banking and finance groups.

UOB Painting of the Year²⁹⁶ was inaugurated in 1982 by the banking and finance group UOB Bank, based in Singapore. This annual art competition is held in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. It looks to find 'the next generation of Southeast Asian artists', and contribute to greater awareness and appreciation of art.

Usaha Tegas Heritage Art Competition²⁹⁷ was initiated by the Usaha Tegas investment holding company in 2000. Its themes change but are usually in line with encouraging an understanding about the country's intangible heritage. Focus areas include oral traditions (phrases, idioms, folk tales, narrated myths and legends) Another focus area has been Folklore material including crafts

Vision Petron Art Competition²⁹⁸ is organised by the oil company's national student art competition for painting, photography, videography and music.

Anugerah Seni BNM²⁹⁹ is run by the country's Central Bank – Bank Negara. The bank has its own 'Malaysia Museum and Art Gallery' facilities and undertakes some work in artist showcasing.

Visual Arts and Cross-over Hubs and Networks

Malaysia's creative economy is variously interdisciplinary and impact-facing. Creative and cultural hubs, many of them independently run, are bringing together creative enterprises, arts and craft practitioners, technologists and a range of complementary activities to play a vital role in energising and mobilising creative work. Such hubs offer safe social spaces for interaction, spaces for production and innovation, for learning and sharing, and for showcasing and exhibition. They are featured throughout this Insights document. Below is a sample with cross-over into the visual arts and crafts.

Projek Rabak is an Ipoh-based multidisciplinary artist collective. Inspired by Jakarta-based collective, Ruangrupa, it was created to build a similar ecosystem to support Malaysian contemporary artists and multidisciplinary collaborations. It has developed programmes, festivals, and workshops for the creative community both locally and internationally. Its publishing house, Rabak-lit, introduced in 2011, has produced Malaysian pop culture and creative literature in the form of poetries, travelogues, anecdotes and art critics. Khizanat, another initiative created in 2013, is an alternative-space in Ipoh which focuses on hosting creative programmes, talks, sharing sessions, workshops, and music showcases.³⁰⁰ It operates Khizanat, a cultural hub in collaboration with Miker to bring together all artistic, creative and cultural activities—with emphasis on contemporary arts, youth culture and lifestyle. The hub is home to an artist studio space, art gallery, alternative cinema and concept store containing books, records and other merchandise.³⁰¹

²⁹¹ <http://www.klphotoawards.com>

²⁹² <http://www.homarttrans.com>

²⁹³ <http://www.homarttrans.com>

²⁹⁴ http://www.mycreative.com.my/news_events/%20visual-art-pitch-4

²⁹⁵ <http://www.facebook.com/MyTigervalues>

²⁹⁶ <http://www.uobgroup.com/uobandart>

²⁹⁷ <http://www.instagram.com/heritageartcompetition>

²⁹⁸ <http://www.visionpetronmalaysia.com>

²⁹⁹ <http://www.museumbnm.gov.my>

³⁰⁰ Projek Rabak. https://creativehubs.my/creative_hub/projek-rabak; Official website: <https://www.facebook.com/projekrabak>

³⁰¹ Khizanat. <https://www.facebook.com/khizanat>

PBUY (PeaceBeUponYou)³⁰² is an Ipoh-based urban collective that operates a store that not only sells merchandise but also offers spaces for events and gatherings – formal or informal.

KOTA-K Studio³⁰³ established since 2017 is a creative space in Kota Kinabalu (Sabah East Malaysia). It is co-run by two architectural design firms, Arkitrek and Phyllisophy Creatives. It operates as an office during the day, and as an arts space in the evenings and weekends. The studio aims to develop a community of makers and thinkers through workshops and talks related to all things in arts, architecture and crafts.

Borneo Art Collective³⁰⁴ is a community-based sharing platform with a vision to 'reconnect the missing narrative of Borneo with the world.' It is an exhilarating example of the cultural influence of Kuching reaching national importance. They have recently transformed the old Ting & Ting Supermarket building into the Think and Tink arts venue, adding to the city's expanding cultural ecosystem.

For further information on visual arts and craft networks and hubs, see the Creative Hub Malaysia website: <https://creativehubs.my>.

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[Borneo Art Collective is] deeply rooted in the concept of weaving – a meaningful meeting of two opposite elements woven into a whole. We are the cultural weavers of Borneo, aspiring to document and understand the simple stories of Borneans. We weave in the threads bit by bit, day after day until a pattern emerges.

Borneo Art Collective

A sharing session at Khizanat.

Photo © Projek Rabak

³⁰² <https://peacebeuponyou.co>

³⁰³ Kota-K Studio. <https://www.facebook.com/kotak8sireh>

³⁰⁴ <http://borneoartcollective.org>



3 Movers and Shakers in Visual Arts – a sample

With a diverse, fast-changing visual arts and crafts scene that spans the very traditional and the hyper-digital, key ‘movers and shakers’ will vary by geography, style, medium and their interest in external parties looking to build relations in Malaysia. Below is therefore a sample of artists and intermediaries, both established and up and coming.

Adeline Ooi is the current Director Asia of the world’s most prestigious art fair, Art Basel (since 2015).³⁰⁵ Ooi directs the fair’s Hong Kong show and leads the Asia-Pacific region. She co-founded Rogue Art and worked as a curator and art advisor.

Rogue Art³⁰⁶ was co-founded in 2008 by Beverly Yong, Rachel Ng and Adeline Ooi, a group of contemporary Southeast Asian art specialists. The platform focuses on the creative, strategic and organisational management of art and cultural projects, exhibitions, collections and publications. Rogue Art is the go-to platform to access expertise, knowledge and connections on the visual arts scene in Malaysia. Its co-founders have recently published a four-volume series, *Narratives in Malaysian Art*, which documented the development of the country’s contemporary art scene over the course of a decade.³⁰⁷ The team frequently advises policy and investment opportunities, including CENDANA for the *Ecosystem Mapping Guides – Klang Valley Malaysia*.³⁰⁸

Yee I-Lann³⁰⁹ is an artist whose work focuses on issues of culture, power and social experiences. She is a co-founding member of LabDNA, an art collective based in Kuala Lumpur. She is also a creative director, curator, and project organiser. Some of these earlier projects: *To Catch A Cloud* at Planetarium Negara (1996), *Blue Skies* held at Pudu Jail (1997), *Bonding With Gaya Street* (2012), *Singapore Biennale: If The World Changed* (2013), *The Ricecooker Archives: Southeast Asian Rock ‘n’ Roll Treasury* (2016). Yee is currently part of KOTA-K studio and is based in Sabah.

Nadiah Bamadhaj is a Malaysian-born artist, currently residing in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. She has been practising as an artist for almost 20 years and works across digital media, drawing and installations. Widely-recognised for her signature style of charcoal and collage drawings, her focus is often on marginalised communities and histories as well as sensitive socio-political topics. For her exhibition, ‘Ravaged’ (2018) at Chamber Fine Art, New York, Bamadhaj focused on the people she met while volunteering at a shelter for trans and cisgender people.³¹⁰

Red Hong Yi³¹¹ previously worked as an architect in Shanghai. She achieved social media fame when a video of her painting, a huge portrait of China basketball player Yao Ming, went viral. Red Hong Yi creates mixed media installations by ‘reinterpreting everyday materials through the accumulation of objects’. She combines traditional craftsmanship and digital technology, often expressing themes of women, race and the environment.

³⁰⁵ <https://www.artbasel.com/about/team>

³⁰⁶ <http://www.rogueart.asia/ra/about-us>

³⁰⁷ <https://www.thestar.com.my/lifestyle/culture/2019/09/28/rogueart-book-project-narratives-in-malaysian-art-series>

³⁰⁸ <https://www.cendana.com.my/our-activities/our-activities/visual-arts-ecosystem-map>

³⁰⁹ <http://www.yeelann.com>

³¹⁰ <https://www.artandmarket.net/dialogues/2019/10/25/interview-with-artist-nadiah-bamadhaj>

³¹¹ <https://redhongyi.com>

Ashly Nandong is an emerging Malaysian artist, who studies the Borneo traditional 'sapeh' lute and traditional Dayak dance (performing dances of the Iban and Orang Ulu sub-ethnic Dayak people of Sarawak). He is a self-taught contemporary visual artist, incorporating inherited Dayak designs.³¹²

Ana Jonessy³¹³ is a founding member of the cultural hub Bentarakata in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. Although the group had to shut down its physical space, she has continued to produce new work. She also provides vital network support for other artists and crafts people (including the hard of hearing or deaf). This includes 45 both up-and-coming as well as established illustrators, graphic designers, water colourists, digital artists, painters, photographers, toymakers and those who work with leather, metal, and wood. This represents an important core of new work and talent in Borneo.

Rimbun Dahan³¹⁴ is the home of the husband-and-wife team, architect Hijjas Kasturi and Angela Hijjas. This centre, also cultural hub, is 'for developing traditional and contemporary art forms'. It hosts a range of artists residencies 'to encourage visual artists, choreographers and other creative individuals to explore and develop their artistic work'. It also provides residencies for researchers in environmental conservation issues.

Homarttrans³¹⁵ was founded in 2007, its director is the established artist, Bayu Utomo Radjikin. With the key aim to assist and support the development of visual art in Malaysia and facilitate networking with Southeast Asian counterparts, the centre provides a residency programme, Art Fund, and Art award.

Wei-Ling Gallery³¹⁶ is nearly 20 years old, this is the largest commercial gallery in the country with two spaces in Kuala Lumpur. It has played a significant role in bringing Malaysian contemporary art to international audiences and vice versa. Owner and operator, Lim Wei-Ling co-curated the inaugural Malaysian pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2019.

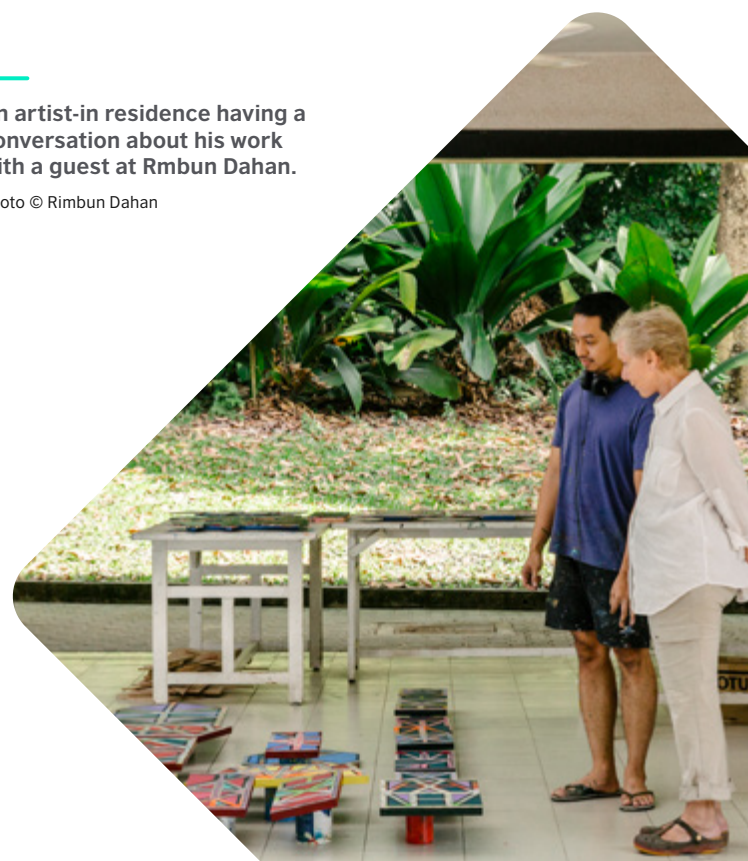
Nadirah Zakariya³¹⁷ is a visual artist and a photo journalist, born in Malaysia and raised in Japan and the USA. She currently lives and works in New York. Zakariya was selected as one of the Gen T in Asia to watch for 2020.³¹⁸

Goh Sze Ying³¹⁹ is a curator at National Gallery Singapore and was a part of the Singapore Biennale curatorial team in 2019.³²⁰

A+ Works of Art³²¹ is a contemporary art gallery, founded in 2017 by Joshua Lim. It frequently collaborates with a network of independent curators. Among which are Malaysian independent curators, writers and researchers including, Lee Weng-Choy, Vincent Leong, Eric Goh to name a few.

An artist-in residence having a conversation about his work with a guest at Rmbun Dahan.

Photo © Rimbun Dahan



³¹² <https://princes-foundation.org/school-of-traditional-arts/news/hrh-the-prince-of-wales-visits-degree-show-2018>

³¹³ <https://anajonessy.substack.com>

³¹⁴ <https://rimbundahan.org>

³¹⁵ <http://www.homarttrans.com>

³¹⁶ <http://weiling-gallery.com>

³¹⁷ <https://www.instagram.com/nadirahzakariya>

³¹⁸ <https://generationt.asia/gent-list/introducing-the-gent-list>

³¹⁹ <https://cargocollective.com/sze>

³²⁰ <https://www.singaporebiennale.org/about/team>

³²¹ <http://www.aplusart.asia/about>

Artivism



Visual arts are often a critical ally in advancing social justice in Malaysia.

Gerimis Art Project (GAP)³²² a non-profit that provides a platform where art, culture and traditions interact. Sustainability-minded, it advocates for indigenous rights and the community's traditional heritage and lifestyle. GAP was involved in the 'Weaving Hopes for the Future' project in collaboration with Klima Action Malaysia (KAMY) and UK-based organisation Students for Global Health (SfGH). The programme aims to empower the Orang Asli that suffer from the climate crisis through a mentorship scheme to cultivate leadership and organisational skills for the country's indigenous communities, particularly women and youth.³²³

Formed in 2017 and based in Kuching, **Sarawak Eco-Warriors (SEW)**³²⁴ is an NGO of eco-conscious youths and students from Swinburne University of Technology Sarawak Campus. It aims to educate, empower and inspire local communities through the conservation of nature. The group has been proactive in pushing policy change and urging government agencies to involve community stakeholders in climate-related decision making. In collaboration with local artist **Nia Latif**, SEW's first project was held at a secondary school in Sematan. A 96-square-foot art piece was created from marine debris collected during clean-up. The group also runs regular beach clean-ups together with the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) Malaysia Programme and Kuching Beach Cleaners.³²⁵

³²² <https://www.gerimisart.com>

³²³ <https://www.malaymail.com/news/life/2021/02/18/malaysian-eco-warriors-use-art-and-activism-to-empower-orang-asli-in-climat/1950821>

³²⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/sarawakecowarriors>

³²⁵ <https://www.newsarawaktribune.com.my/sarawak-eco-warriors-standing-up-for-environmental-justice>

4 Collaboration Opportunities: Innovation and Resilience

As presented in this chapter, Malaysia has a diverse, multi-textured and fast-changing visual arts and crafts ecosystem. For the UK it offers opportunities for collaborative practice across the above areas, as well as a growing market for buyers/collectors seeking emergent Malaysian art. In conversations with artists and institutions in both the UK and Malaysia, the main areas of collaboration most desired so far are in the following areas:

- Education: to build the technical and entrepreneurial capacity of Malaysian visual arts. In turn this provides opportunities to build skills and management services which leverage UK expertise and experience.
- Knowledge-sharing between institutions: to explore, for example, the connections between very traditional art and craft forms and the rapid digitalisation underway across the sector. In Malaysia, new digitally enabled platforms and networks are emerging which would provide innovative pathways for the UK arts sector.
- Building relationships between individual artists, especially with regard to impact-facing arts such as for inclusion and environmental sustainability. In Malaysia, art and impact go hand in hand. The UK can learn from the models of artistic activism across Malaysia. Meanwhile Malaysia can learn from some of the more codified and system-wide models which have been developed in the UK – such as with regard to carbon neutral artistic practice. Moreover, Malaysia is an inspiring, safe yet creatively challenging country for inspirational intercultural dialogue, artistic exchange, residencies and showcasing.

Additional Resources

- Klang Valley Visual Arts Map, Cultural Economy Development Agency (CENDANA)
<https://www.cendana.com.my/our-activities/our-activities/visual-arts-ecosystem-map>
- British Council Crafting Futures
<https://www.britishcouncil.my/programmes/arts/work/crafts>

***Forbidden Fruits* installation at Rainforest World Music Festival Fringe 2018s.**

Photo © Rainforest World Music Festival Fringe





Chapter 7: Performing Arts

In collaboration with Dr Ann Lee,
PhD Southeast Asia Studies (NUS)

1

Sector Profile

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A highly complex mosaic of theatre, music and dance forms.

Prof Dr Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof, academic

In this chapter, we explore the diverse and extensive contemporary performing arts scene in Malaysia. The sector comprises independent, private and public sector-supported practitioners, practices and institutions. These make for the mosaic of majority/minority cultures and national/vernacular languages, some of which have origins from over 2,000 years ago.

Malaysia presents an enormous landscape of opportunity for UK and other international artists and organisations seeking to connect through the performing arts. From a socio-cultural and

ethnographic perspective, Malaysian performing arts are incredibly rich and tell multiple stories of human development in this diverse part of the world. For performers, the expanding performing arts infrastructure provides opportunities to develop and tour new work, as well as for residencies. Plus, for organisations and artists seeking collaboration opportunities with an exciting pool of talent, Malaysia offers a highly skilled professional performing arts sector and associated production and digital innovation landscape.

Rich 'Mosaic'

One way to encapsulate the range and patterns of Malaysian performing arts is to picture the following ten areas: (Yousuf, 2004)

- Storytelling and elementary theatre
- Puppet theatre
- Dance and dance theatre
- Operatic genres
- Theatre as ritual
- Folk and syncretic
- Music, court patronage forms
- Islam and the performing arts
- Contemporary performing arts
- Malay films and television dramas

Important Cultural Policy Influences

While the National Creative Industry policy has been in place since 2000, three policies are still influential across Malaysian performing arts and culture. They were initiated as a way to build national unity, after racial riots between groups of Malay and Chinese in Kuala Lumpur and several towns.

- National Cultural Policy of 1971 (NCP)
- National Education Act of 1961 (NEA)
- National Language Bill (NLB) of 1967
- These are in addition to the Constitution (Article 152)

Performing Arts as a Tourism and Promotional Product



From the 1980s, arts and culture development in Malaysia was closely linked to tourism and the promotion of the country's culture, using such tag lines as 'Malaysia, Truly Asia'. As a consequence, Malaysian arts and culture practitioners and institutions became better known globally, but the full diversity of Malaysian performing arts still has relatively low international visibility.

For example, multicultural platforms sought to reflect the country's three main ethnic groups (as seen from Peninsular Malaysia) – Malay, Chinese and Indian. Performances gave 'glimpses' of Malaysian diversity, such as: via Malay (zapin dance), Chinese (ribbon dance) and Indian

(Bharatanatyam dance). However, the true depth and range of practice to this day remains under-promoted and tourism-facing activities too often present a 'shorthand' of a themed 'Malaysiana'. Activities such as 'dance extravaganzas' have been criticized as being 'exploited as dispensable exotica for promotional purposes' and are 'out-dated, regressive and eventually counter-productive.'³²⁶

In the 2000s, arts and culture were strongly linked to 'Heritage' within the ministerial portfolio. This led to more research, and attention was paid to documentation with an historical perspective, and a commitment to restore 'traditional' forms.

A Blend of Traditional and Contemporary – Wayang Kulit

As one example of traditional Malay forms of theatre, the most well-known is wayang kulit (shadow puppetry)

- Wayang kulit Siam (or wayang kulit Kelantan) as well as wayang kulit Melayu (such as Kumpulan Wayang Kulit Sri Warisan Pusaka (founding director: Eddin Khoo)
- Wayang kulit Gedek (in Kedah and Perlis) and
- Wayang kulit Purwa (in Johore).

The terms 'traditional' and 'contemporary' do not adequately capture the complexity of Malaysian performing arts, where the past and present often interact to generate new forms and narratives. For example, in dance:

- Contemporary dance performer, Aida Redza, utilises 'traditional' forms in both exploratory or habitual ways to express contemporary issues.
- Sutra dance company (artistic director Ramli Ibrahim) is known for presenting classic Bharatanatyam and Odissi, among other contemporary dance forms.
- In Odissi, a typical repertoire is concerned with various sequences, starting with mangalacharana, sthayee, pallavi, abhinaya and moksha. Umesh Shetty directed a production where there were no stops between the sequences, so building on awareness of movement, and an expansion of the vocabulary within the genre.

A moment behind the Wayang Kulit screen.

Photo © PUSAKA



³²⁶ Ramli Ibrahim, the MalayMail, 2020.

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... performance-makers have been recognising that the way they choose to embrace technology can not only enhance but possibly birth new forms of theatre.

Akanksha Raja, *Offstage*, 2020

In 2008, wayang puppet theatre was officially inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (UNESCO).

- Although wayang forms are historically from Nusantara, Malaysian forms can be included under the broad term of 'wayang puppet theatre'.
- However, contemporary wayang kulit has been subject to state ban since the 1998, marking wayang kulit along with other forms of traditional art including the Mak Yong dance for containing elements deemed "un-Islamic".³²⁷
- Although banned for locals in Kelantan, wayang kulit can be staged openly at the cultural centre.

Fusion Wayang Kulit



Presented by Fusion Wayang Kulit – this Star Wars-inspired performance was a modern take on Wayang Kulit Kelantan. New figures were designed and laser-cut by Tintoy Chuo and Teh Take Huat together with master puppeteer, Muhammad Dain Othman. Computer-generated special effects were added as an integral part of the show.

- Lead characters: Perantau Langit (the Sky Voyager) and Sangkala Vedeh (the powerful General Vedeh), recalling key plots and characters in Star Wars
- This was an attempt to revive the waning art form and attract local audiences

³²⁷ ChannelNewsAsia, 2019. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/malaysia-wayang-kulit-modern-twist-traditional-kelantan-ban-11894408>

2 The Performing Arts Ecosystem

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And then there was Netflix!

Chiew Ruoh Peng

Contemporary theatre in Malaysia has been described in terms of 'parallel-streams'³²⁸ to reflect that while one language is officially considered the national language, other languages spoken develop alongside, but separately. As demonstrated in the box below, many Malaysians:

- Are bilingual in dominant languages but also code-switch
- Audiences for theatre do not cross over as easily.

Figure 6 Theatre Landscape/Ecosystem

Malay-language theatre groups and individuals in Peninsular Malaysia include Teater Modular (Ridhwan Saidi), Revolution Arts, Lenggok Entertainment, Dramatis Studio, Lin Haslinaz, Tronoh Theatre Shop, Pertubuhan Seni Kayangan Perak, Pertubuhan Sukarelawan Amal Wangsa Maju, and Hati Seni Selangor.

Chinese-language theatre sees long-time producer and director, Loh Kok Man in regular joint productions with companies and individuals from other languages and genres. Poet Chiew Ruoh Peng also produces theatre.

Language-based Ecosystem for Theatre

Like Chinese-language theatre, Indian-language theatre is a 'catch-all' for various languages. The two main Tamil language theatre companies have been Spike Selva's Sehal Studio and S T Bala's Phenomena Seni Pentas though these have not been active lately. The Malayalam theatre group, Kerala Samajam, has also been dormant in recent years. These are all located in Peninsular Malaysia.

English language-theatre is led by three companies over 25 years old – Five Arts Centre, the Actors Studio, and Instant Café Theatre Company. Younger, bilingual, up and coming companies include Teater Panas Panas, launched just before the lockdown. They kicked off with '50 Plays by Women' as well as workshops for early 20-something bilingual and actors more conversant in Malay.

³²⁸ Diamond, 2002.



The 'youngness' of dance has always meant regeneration.

Bilqis Hijjas

Dance and Dance Theatre

The classification between 'dance and theatre' is often blurred because certain forms effectively combine. For example:

- Kuda kepang (hobby horse dance), performers ride on symbolic horses like 'props'.
- Kuda pasu, the movement of horses is mimicked, as performed by the Bajau people in Sabah.

The independent artistic dance scene is partly supported by cultural bodies in the public sector, including Istana Budaya (the National Theatre), Yayasan Johore (Johore Foundation), Lembaga Kebudayaan Sabah (Sabah Cultural Board) and the Sarawak Cultural Village.

The private sector affords livelihoods via performance engagements for television and business (product launches and corporate events).

However, except for those largely state-supported companies, a dancer's livelihood exists on a project-to-project basis.

- The contemporary dance group, Dua Space Dance Theatre is a rare example of a company that has employed dancers, a manager, choreographer, and artistic director.

Some of the traditional dance forms are being imaginatively re-worked by contemporary choreography. This includes the use of digital technology to reinterpret traditional forms and to reach new audiences in different ways. Since Covid-19, female choreographers such as Amy Len, Ren Xin and SueKi Yee, have been producing innovative work online.

Disability Arts



Various efforts have been made to provide opportunities and access for casts, crews and audiences with disabilities. However, there is much still to achieve.

- Sign language has been on mainstream television for about 30 years
- Inclusive policies about the hard of hearing and deaf is not a staple in Malaysian theatre and dance.
- There are no variously-abled theatre, dance and music organisations
- Performances are occasionally put on by associations of people with low vision, hard of hearing, Down's Syndrome and autism.
- In the 1990s, theatre company Kualiti Works (now defunct) cast a blind actor in a professional production and regularly invited guests from the Malaysian Association for the Blind to watch their shows, integrated with regular audiences.

Opportunity: to build capacity and literacy for all types of disability arts and develop good practice in terms of access and career development, with the UK a leading nation for disability arts and access.

MyDance Alliance Flagship Programmes

<https://mydancealliance.org/>

MyDance Alliance is the leading non-profit organisation supporting dance in Malaysia. It is the go-to platform for developing dance and building relations with the dance sector of Malaysia.

- **MyDance e-newsletter** – An emailed compilation of upcoming performances, news, opportunities, workshops, training and activities in Malaysian dance and by Malaysian dancers abroad.
- **Dancebox** – An informal performance platform in partnership with The Actors Studio.
- **Langkah** – An annual online periodical edited by David Lim featuring writings from the Malaysian contemporary dance community. It aims to document the experiences and celebrate the achievements of the contemporary dance community, and to encourage critical reflection and dialogue.
- **Dancing in Place** – A weekend of site-specific dance performances, annually at private arts centre Rimbun Dahan, with other editions at Damansara Performing Arts Centre (2016 & 2017), Urbanscapes (2018), and Kota Kinabalu (2020).
- **MyDance Festival** — A major multi-weekend showcase of Malaysian (and sometimes international) dance works, including masterclasses, seminars and other activities, every few years (2001, 2003, 2005, 2011, 2013, and Tepak Tari 2015, Dancebox Festival 2019).
- **Mentorship of Emerging Choreographers** – Occasional projects helmed by experienced local choreographers, providing guidance and performance platforms, including Dance Escalator (2012-2013) and Dancing Alone (2019).
- **Internships** – MyDance committee members supervise tertiary dance students doing their industrial training placements, to introduce them to performance venues, local dancers, choreographers and companies, and the work involved in running dance productions and a non-profit organisation.
- **Workshops by International Artists** – MyDance helps to connect international dance artists passing through Malaysia with opportunities to teach workshops to the local dance community.
- **Kongsi-Kongsi** – Occasional informal sharing sessions for Malaysian dancers to share their experiences with the local dance community, usually discussing training and performance opportunities overseas.
- **Small Grants** – Occasional rounds of funding up to RM1,500 to support projects, performances and training by Malaysian dancers. Funds are drawn from organisational savings.

Dancing in Place 2018 by
MyDance Alliance at Rimbun
Dahan.

Photo © Andrew Fotoworld



Malay Folk Dance + Modern Choreography



Malay folk dance/Chinese choreographer, **Leng Poh Gee** (Langkah) experimented with his early work to find ways to push the boundary of traditional dance with contemporary choreography.

In August 2013, with the support of the National Department for Culture and Arts (JKKN) — Kakiseni's Grant 'To Reduce Production Costs', LAPAR Lab was able to produce *Space Bar*, a double-bill contemporary dance performance that consisted of *Safe Distance*, choreographed

by Mak Foong Ming, and Gee's dance work *Belonging*, at Damansara Performing Arts Centre.

Kyo Hong, one of the dancers, is a recent graduate with a dance diploma from the National Academy of Arts, Heritage and Culture (ASWARA). He taught *Zapin Kampung Manggis* to the cast of *Belonging*.

'In the final scene of *Belonging*, I once again attempted to create dance derived from Malay folk dance,' said Gee.

“

The energy and playfulness of the zapin dance cheered us up... dancers who were fresh to the genre faced difficulties with the coordination of the stylistic movement with the unconventional counting of the accompanying song based on pantun (Malay poetic verse).

Leng Poh Gee³²⁹

³²⁹ <https://langkah.mydancealliance.org/malay-dance-as-a-source-of-inspiration-for-contemporary-creations>

Other Forms of Theatre

Musical theatre

The development of musical theatre in Malaysia has been spearheaded by Enfiniti Productions, led by Tiara Jacquelina,

- Popular home-grown musicals include *Puteri Gunung Ledang* and *P. Ramlee*.
- In 2008, 15 musicals of varying scale were staged in the country. (Gonzales, 2011, 155)

Comedians and comedy groups

Stand-up comedy and comedians have proved popular in the last decade, with several Malaysian comedians going on to have their own comedy specials on Netflix. Among the most well-known are:

- Harith Iskandar
- Dr Jason Leong
- Joanne Kam
- Other female comedians including Shamaine Othman and Farah Rani

The Malaysian Association of Chinese Comedians (MACC), a parody of the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission) comprising Douglas Lim, Kuah Jenhan, Dr Jason Leong and Phoon Chi Ho was able to tour the country but closed recently.

Malaysian comedians are also active overseas. UK-based Malaysian comedian **Nigel Ng**, also known as Uncle Roger, received much social media traction playing a middle-age Asian stereotype as he 'reviewed' the recipe of BBC fried rice in 2020. Ng is a co-host of a comedy podcast *Rice to Meet You* with UK-based Swedish comedian Evelyn Mok. Ng has opened for Hollywood veteran Korean-American Ken Jeong's first European stand-up show and was nominated for best newcomer at the 2019 Edinburgh Fringe Festival.³³⁰

Comedian **Phil Wang** has gained significant profile in the UK. Phil was born in Stoke-on-Trent and raised in Kota Kinabalu. Phil is also a member of the sketch comedy group Daphne, and co-creator of their BBC Radio 4 series, *Daphne Sounds Expensive*. He has appeared regularly on national TV in the UK and written for *The Guardian*.

George Town Festival, an annual art and cultural event in Penang.

Photo © Penang Global Tourism Sdn Bhd

³³⁰ <https://www.scmp.com/magazines/style/celebrity/article/3117833/real-uncle-roger-who-malaysian-comedian-nigel-ng-behind>



3 Distinctive Features of the Malaysian Performing Arts Sector

Diversity remains a core strength of the theatre, dance and music traditions in Malaysia. Over 2,000 years of indigenous and international influences has meant constant refashioning and reshaping via influences from the Middle and Near East, within Southeast Asia, and from almost all major Asian religions and ways of faith: animistic traditions, Hinduisim, Buddhism, Chinese folk religions, and Islam.

Physical infrastructure and Festivals

Investment in the infrastructure of performing arts spaces has not seen much development from the late 1990s/early 2000s. Then new buildings including Istana Budaya (Culture Palace) plus theatre auditoriums were built across the country in main towns and market centres. Istana Budaya has staged both domestic and international musical theatre, indicating the state's support of international collaboration. (See 'Performance Venues' under 'Audiences'). However, Malaysia is seeing the growth of independent cultural spaces and creative hubs, some of which involve spaces for production, rehearsal and presentation.

- The main production centres of theatre, whether amateur, semi-amateur or professional, have been in Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Ipoh, Kota Kinabalu and Kuching.

The following profiles the landscape of performance venues across Kuala Lumpur/Petaling Jaya, followed by Penang.

Performance Venues within the Capital (*Pre-Covid)

Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya

- Istana Budaya (1,500 pax)
- Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre – Pentas/ Stage 1(600 pax) and Stage 2 (250 pax)
- Auditorium DBKL (City Hall Auditorium) 600 pax
- PJ Civic Centre (1000 pax)
- Sutra Ampitheatre (150 pax)
- Temple of Fine Arts (600 pax)

Dancebox – a Major Dance Festival



Reputable festival founded in 2001, **Dancebox** is produced by MyDance Alliance in partnership with Actors Studio.

It remains a popular platform for new and experimental dance works from emerging and established choreographers.

- Programmes are presented in professional theatres, featuring an informal setting
- Tickets are priced with an aim of affordability and accessibility to all.

- Panggung Bandaraya (old Town Hall) (350 pax)
- MAS Auditorium (500 pax)
- Malaysian Tourist Centre (MTC) – Main amphitheatre (400 pax), Mini auditorium (150 pax)
- National Museum Theatre (300 pax)
- Securities Commission Theatre, Damansara Heights (400 pax)
- Balai Seni Lukis Negara (National Art Gallery) Theatre (150 pax)
- Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP), Balai Budaya (500 pax)

Black Boxes

- Kotak, Five Arts Centre (150 pax)
- Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka's Stor Teater (100 pax)
- ASWARA Theatre (300 pax)
- Sunway University's Black Box Theatre (150 pax)
- Taylors University Purple Box Theatre (100 pax)
- University of Nottingham theatre (100 pax; no seats)
- Fonteyn Theatre, Federal Academy of Ballet, Small studio theatre (150 pax)

Theatres in Penang

- PenangPAC (200 pax)

Festivals

Covid-19 has required a pivot to digital and online platforms. This has proven very challenging for some festivals which were heavily promoted by the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism.

Opted to miss a year (2021)

- Cooler Lumpur Festival, Kuala Lumpur
- Kota Kinabalu (KK) Jazz Festival, Sabah.

Continued

- Penang's George Town Festival (of performing arts) has discontinued for the time being, but its sister festival, the George Town Literary Festival 2020 was held online via podcasts with several series of webinars organised by Gerakbudaya and PEN Malaysia, respectively.

Advocacy

In the last few years, advocacy organisations and coalitions comprising performing arts practitioners have developed. These include ReformARTsi, PEN Malaysia (centre affiliated to PEN International), and the Freedom of Expression cluster (comprising women's groups, migrant workers, unions, journalists and LGBTIQ groups).

Refugees and Migrant Workers – an Untapped Talent Pool

- As of March 2018, more than 155,000 (155,880) refugees and asylum seekers registered with UNHCR, the United Nations Refugee agency which is also based in Malaysia.
- A refugee's festival, organised by Mahi Ramakrishnan, has resulted in a theatre group of refugees.
- **Parastoo Theatre** was set up in 2017 by Saleh Sepas, a writer in theatre, radio and television from Afghanistan who fled the Taliban with his wife and three children to Malaysia.
- A poetry festival of writing by migrant workers has also been led by writer and poet, Bernice Chauly.

ReformARTsi

ReformARTsi Coalition, is an advocacy group formed by a loose affiliate of advocacy group to position including around 114 members, 53 of which are art groups/companies.

- Advocates for policy improvements via three subcommittees: Arts Education, Funding for the Arts, and Freedom of Expression in the Arts.

- Secretariat currently at Five Arts Centre.
- Has made suggestions and initiatives to assist arts practitioners during the pandemic

It has long been vocal about arts-related issues such as that protracted ties to the tourism ministry were part of 'strategic neglect' by successive government administrations

(ReformARTsi, 2020).

Market and Audience

While there is plenty data about markets and audiences for television and online, data about performing arts audiences is scarce.

Sime Darby Foundation's available statistics (2017 – 2020)³³¹ show the Foundation's four-year support for almost 30 festivals (combining performing arts and visual arts) with over RM1.3 million 'festival goers' in attendance.³³²

CENDANA has also conducted an audience survey during the pandemic, with nearly 700 respondents (629) aged between 16 and 44 years, residing in Kuala Lumpur, neighbouring state, Selangor, and also in Penang and Sabah.

One feature measured the likelihood of audience members opting for 'digital' versus 'live' arts and culture events. This result suggests that 'digital' arts and cultural events may not be a 'poor second cousin' for long.³³³

- A low 7% of the respondents for 'extremely likely'
- A healthy 37% for 'likely'
- Perhaps predictable majority of 46% for 'unlikely'.

New Models for Theatre?

It might be said that the 'perfect storm' of factors arising from the Covid pandemic and suspension of the travel industry (and as a result the 30-year-old arts-culture-and-tourism paradigm/model) has combined with the 'perfect opportunity' to develop captive audiences via the surge in demand of online content.

However, the pandemic has exposed gaps in the digital capacity of both producers and audiences, and next generation models such as immersive digital theatre, convergence with gaming, and opportunities for live-screening of theatre; are all in their infancy in Malaysia. There is a significant opportunity to connect creative, digital and performing arts sectors toward innovating and co-creating more hybrid approaches – to production, distribution and audience engagement. However, this requires innovative thinking and considerable financial stimulus. Malaysia is well placed to be a digitally innovative theatre producer, but this will require new models of investment and partnership, plus some international collaborations to test innovative approaches in a Malaysian context.

Covid-19 Effects



After the first lockdown (Movement Control Order) in March 2020, culture heritage and Creative Industries activity fell sharply by **-95%**, whereas the Creative Arts and Culture also fell by **-53%**. (Mohd Uzir, 2020)

The 'digital turn' accelerated during Covid-19, opening-up both challenges and opportunities for the country's performing arts sector. Arts markers, practices and institutions face difficulties to 'pivot' online but those which can establish this more 'hybrid' existence will be more resilient.

However, more pressingly, Covid-19 is proving hugely damaging to micro enterprises and freelancers across the performing arts. It will take years to recover and some organisations are unlikely to re-emerge after the pandemic.

³³¹ <http://www.yayasansimedarby.com/our-projects/arts-culture#lg=1&slide=0>

³³² Sime Darby.

³³³ CENDANA, 12 June 2020.

Cloudtheatres.com



“

We had people who'd never seen theatre before experience it for the first-time using Zoom.

Jo Kukathas, theatre maker

The Instant Café Theatre company presented the play *Parah* by Singaporean playwright, Alfian Sa'at (originally staged in 2011) on Zoom, calling it *Parah Zoom*. Four school friends analyse a controversial book in class, resulting in friendships tried by racialism and racism.

- cloudtheatre.com created both a pre-show mingling experience and post-show discussion via chat online.
- Tickets priced at 'pre-Covid norm' and also only RM5 (about 20p) to attract new audiences
- 869 tickets sold
- Audiences estimated to be higher due to #parahwatchparty sessions
- Audience from over 20 countries including Australia, Cambodia, Canada, China, Germany, France, Spain, UK, Hong Kong, Hungary, Indonesia, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Philippines, Sweden, Singapore, South Africa, Taiwan, and the USA.
- Jo Kukathas later involved in online discussion called 'Who's Afraid of Digital Theatre'³³⁴ hosted by Singaporean theatre group Wild Rice theatre.

A recorded performance of *Unity (1918)* by KLPAC was filmed during the lockdown and streamed on cloudtheatre.com.

Photo © Bryan Chang



³³⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wwAMoMrNBnc>

4 Connectors and Convenors (selected)

The following list focuses on key companies and organisations which are playing a formative role in the Malaysian performing arts ecosystem.

Actors Studio/Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre

Instrumental in the Malaysian performing arts scene, actors, directors and producers, Dato' Faridah Merican (doyenne of Malaysian theatre) and Joe Hasham (trained at NADA, Australia) formed the Actors Studio in 1989. They built the first privately-owned and operated theatre space, going on to build others before creating the award-winning Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre in conjunction with YTL Corporation. Its sister venue is PenangPAC.

www.theactorstudio.com.my/klpac

Akademi Seni Budaya dan Warisan Kebangsaan (ASWARA)

It is the country's leading institution of higher learning for arts, culture and heritage, providing learning and teaching space, academic research, a publishing centre and professional advisory services. There are presently 8 faculties, comprising both performing arts and film and television, animation and multimedia.

www.aswara.edu.my

Perhaps its most well-known success is the professional dance collective, **ASK Dance company**.

www.facebook.com/ASKdancecompany

Society of Performing Arts, Kota Kinabalu (SPArKs)

A small but capable society, it has been a driving force behind the fledgling #KKArtsFestival, based in Sabah's state capital, Kota Kinabalu. The Society has been developing ties with local as well as international cultural bodies (such as in Taiwan and the US). With more support through funding and curation options, the Festival can be strengthened.

sparks.org.my

MyDanceAlliance

Founded in 2001, MyDance Alliance is a non-profit volunteer organisation that derives its credibility from a paying membership of dance practitioners, academics, and dance fans in Malaysia. It shares information about the dance community, provides platforms for education, performance and capacity-building (also funding when possible), and advocates on behalf of the Malaysian dance community at home and abroad. Under the leadership of Prof Mohd. Anis Md Nor, the Research & Documentation network of MyDance Alliance organised the Asia Pacific International Dance Conference in 2011, and the International Conference on Dance Education in 2014 and 2018.

mydancealliance.org

Rainforest World Music Festival

From its independent beginnings in Kuching, Sarawak, over 20 years ago, this festival has showcased world music including traditional music, world fusion, and contemporary world music. Today it is an annual three-day festival with the main-stage evening concerts plus daytime workshops, indigenous craft, culture and food. It was awarded one of the best 25 world music festivals by Songlines for six years from 2010 to 2015.

www.rwmf.net

Five Arts Centre

Founded in 1984, by theatre directors Chin San Sooi and Krishen Jit, and dancer-choreographer Marion D'Cruz, Five Arts Centre is a collective that has been focused on Malaysian culture and identity through 'explorations and fusions of local vocabularies, forms and traditions' in relation to the global. Influential and innovative, the collective has performed work globally including in the UK.

www.fiveartscentre.org

Instant Café Theatre Company

Founded in 1989 by Malaysian fresh graduates recently returned – Jo Kukathas, Jit Murad, Zahim Albakri – and one British theatre graduate, Andrew Leci. Joined by talented friends with energy and a yen for performance, their first skits were Monty Python-esque but, crucially, adapted to the Malaysian context. The political humour was and is rightfully considered by many to be 'edgy, deeply subversive or sometimes just plain silly'. Under Jo Kukathas as Artistic Director, the company has continued its trademark satire, while also adding a new generation of award-winning Malaysian playwrights and writing.

instantcafetheatre.com

PUSAKA

PUSAKA is a cultural organisation that has long worked closely with leading practitioners and 'custodians' of ritual and traditional performing arts in Malaysia. It works to both archive and actively strengthen the practice of these traditions at the grassroots level, organising performances and youth projects to help ensure the heritage is passed on. (Founder Director: Eddin Khoo Creative Director: Pauline Fan)

www.pusaka.org

Temple of Fine Arts

Based in Jalan Berhala, Brickfields (also known as 'Little India') in Kuala Lumpur. Founded in 1981, currently located in a 5-storey building with dance studios (sprung floors and wall-to-wall mirrors), music rooms, 600-seater performance hall, library, healthcare clinic, artefacts and handicrafts retail store. Offers dance and music classes for all including Bharatanatyam, kathak, kuchipudi, carnatic vocal classes, and instruments (flute, mridangam, sitar, tabla, and veena). Inner Space Dance is its professional performing arts company.

<http://www.tfa.org.my/#!home.html>

Version 2020 by Five Arts Centre
post-performance Q&A session
at Kotak.

Photo © Bryan Chang | Five Arts Centre



5 Movers and Shakers (selected)

Below is a sample of individual practitioners, producers, performers and other talents who illustrate the excellence and innovation of the Malaysian performing arts sector:

Mavin Khoo

Mavin Khoo, currently Rehearsal Director for Akram Khan dance company, is internationally recognised as a dance artist, teacher, choreographer and artist scholar. His initial training was at the Temple of Fine Arts, Sutra Dance Theatre and Sri Wilayah Ballet School in Malaysia. He then pursued his training in Bharata Natyam intensively under the legendary dance maestro, Padma Shri Adyar K. Lakshman in India, Cunningham technique at the Cunningham studios in New York and Classical Ballet under Marian St. Claire, Michael Beare, among others. As a contemporary dance artist he has worked with Wayne McGregor, Akram Khan, Shobana Jeyasingh and many others.

Umesh Shetty

Umesh, has choreographed inter-cultural and intra-cultural works for the past 25 years since returning from Australia where he completed a performing arts degree. He himself is trained in bharatanatyam, odissi, kathakali and folk dance at the Temple of Fine Arts (TFA), guided by both his father Gopal Shetty, a pioneer of Indian classical dance in the country, and TFA founder Swami Shantanand Saraswathi. Umesh was also trained in kathak with India's Pandita Rohini Bhatte, Pandit Briju Maharaj and Saswati Sen. In Australia, he trained and performed in western contemporary and classical ballet.

“

I want to be able to reach international audiences, not for the prestige, but because I feel like I should have reached a level when I can speak an international language.

Amy Len

Lee Swee Keong

Lee Swee Keong was trained in fine arts. He is a leading choreographer and Artistic Director of Nyoba-kan, the leading Butoh Dance Company in Malaysia. The company organised The Kuala Lumpur Butoh Festival (which reached a decade old in 2017), presenting performances, exhibitions and master classes with international Butoh masters such as Koichi Tamano and Hiroko Tamano.

Ren Xin

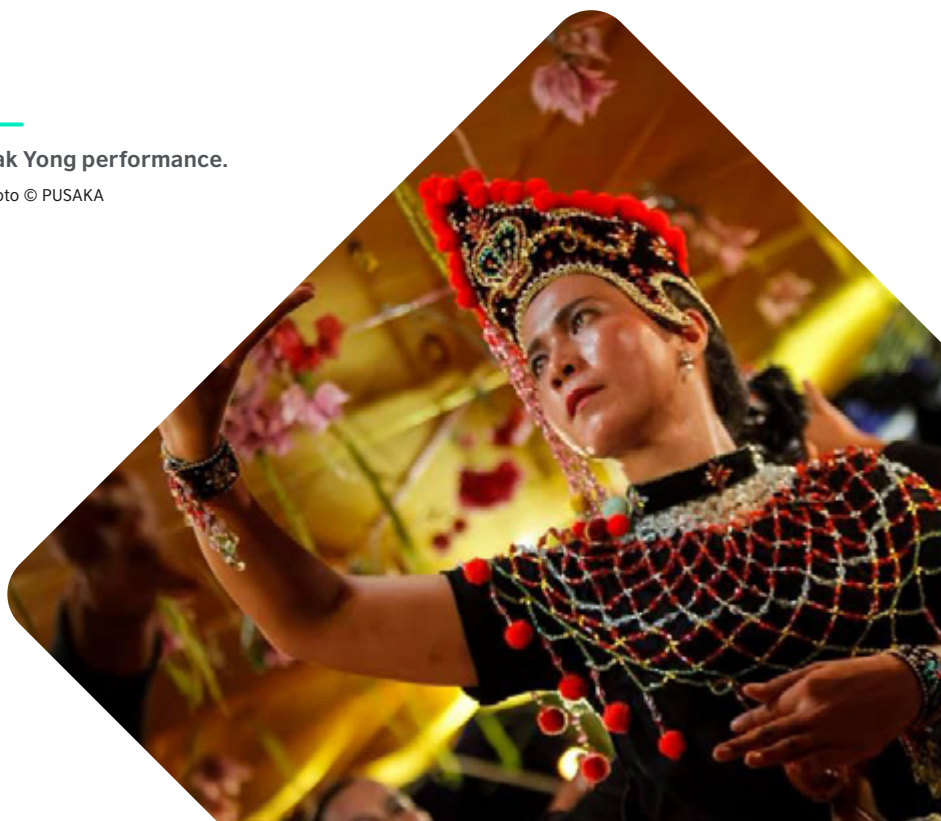
Lee Ren Xin is an independent dance artist and performance-maker. She studied at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in Singapore, and completed her BFA in Dance at Purchase College, New York. She first started choreographing in 2009 in T.H.E. Emerging Choreographers curated by her then mentor Kuik Swee Boon. She has performed her work at festivals in Seoul and Tokyo, with a brief residency at Morishita Studios. In 2016, Ren Xin was invited as a Fellowship Grantee to the Festival Teaterformen in Braunschweig, Germany. A year later, she collaborated with Singaporean dance artist Lee Mun Wai for their duet *Where's The Specificity*, and presented work at the Incheon Arts Platform during a short residency in South Korea. She has also toured to Festival SpielArt in Munich and to Theater Commons Tokyo. In 2018, she was invited as an artist-in-residence by the Department of Cultural Studies, Chinese University of Hong Kong for research and creation.

Amy Len

When she was 16, Amy joined her local Chinese community association. The Kwang Tung association offered classes in modern Chinese dance, taught by Liang Li Juan, who had trained in Taiwan. By the age of 18, Amy was passionate about dance. She started choreographing for Chinese dance competitions and learned by watching Ms Liang. In the mid-90s, she met other young people who were excited about dance: Loke Soh Kim, Choo Tee Kuang, Judimar Hernandez, Aida Redza, Anthony Meh, Ng Mei-Yin. Amy began to perform, choreograph and has since toured globally, such as in China and Germany, with her choreographed works performed by Kwang Tung (Tanz)

Mak Yong performance.

Photo © PUSAKA

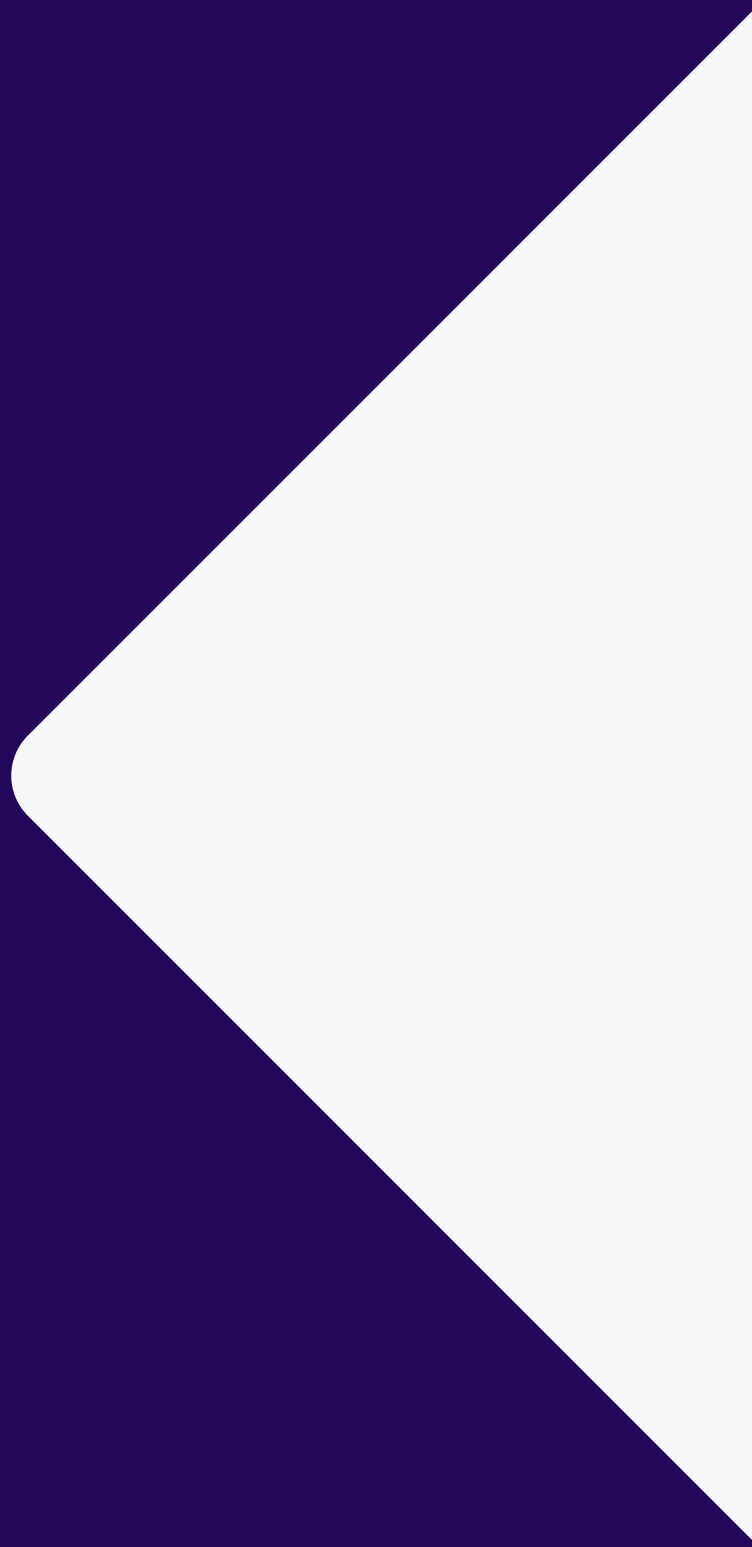


6 In Summary – a Performing Arts Landscape Open for Collaborative Practice and Institutional Development

As presented in this chapter, Malaysia has a diverse, complex and compelling performing arts sector. For the UK it offers opportunities for collaborative practice across the above areas, as well as a growing market for artists and organisations seeking to tour their work, and for experts and institutions looking to grow their business in providing consultancy, business modelling and capacity development. In conversations with artists and institutions in both the UK and Malaysia, the main areas of collaboration most desired so far are in the following areas:

- Education: to build the technical and entrepreneurial capacity of Malaysian performing arts. In turn this provides opportunities to build skills and management services which leverage UK expertise and experience.
- Knowledge-sharing between institutions: to explore, for example, the connections between very traditional performing arts traditions and the rapid digitalisation underway across the sector. In Malaysia, skills in performance, dramaturgy and digital provide ample opportunities for cross-over into the film and animation sector. Malaysian digital talent is well placed to provide the creative and technical skills for an increasingly digitally-driven performing arts sector, plus to connect the performing arts to high growth parts of the digital creative economy.
- Building relationships between individual artists, especially with regard to impact-facing arts such as for inclusion and disability. Malaysia needs to develop opportunities for diverse talent, including talent with disabilities. The UK has played a strong role in this field and there is scope to shape a much more open and accessible performing arts sector in Malaysia.
- Exploring new models for performing arts production – such as in ‘third spaces’ which are not a theatre or performance centre – e.g. in exploring the role of performing arts as part of the retail and leisure mix (which could be insightful for the UK given the decline of retail centres). The growth of small independent venues and festivals also opens up opportunities for collaborative commissioning, touring and talent development.

Further Reading – Practical ‘Need to Know’



Before You travel

- UK help and services in Malaysia:
www.gov.uk/world/malaysia
- British High Commission in Malaysia:
www.gov.uk/world/organisations/british-high-commission-kuala-lumpur
- Foreign travel advice:
www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/malaysia/entry-requirements#:~:text=Visas,diplomatic%20mission%20before%20you%20travel
- PwC Doing Business in Malaysia 2020:
www.pwc.com/my/en/assets/publications/2020/PwC-Doing-Business-Guide-2020.pdf
- British Council Malaysia:
www.britishcouncil.my

Customs and Etiquette

Regional Differences

- ExpatGo – Expat Welcome Guide published by Malaysian government agency on Geography and Climate
www.expago.com/my/2020/12/25/geography-and-climate
- See also Chapter 1 Introduction and Chapter 3 Literature

Getting Around – Transport, Safety

- ExpatGo Travel Guide published by Malaysian government agency
www.expago.com/my/expago-travel-guides

Dos and Don'ts

- Social etiquette guided published by Malaysia My Second Home (MM2H) programme
www.mm2h.com/social-etiquette
- Cultural Atlas – an Australian education resource, detailing core concepts of social etiquette, ethnic diversity, region and sensitivities
culturalatlas.sbs.com.au/malaysian-culture

Freedom of Expression

- Censorship of Arts and Culture in Malaya/Malaysia by online archive MY Art Memory Project
myartmemoryproject.com/censorship
- See also Chapter 4 Literature and Chapter 5 Film, TV, Audiovisual

Appendix

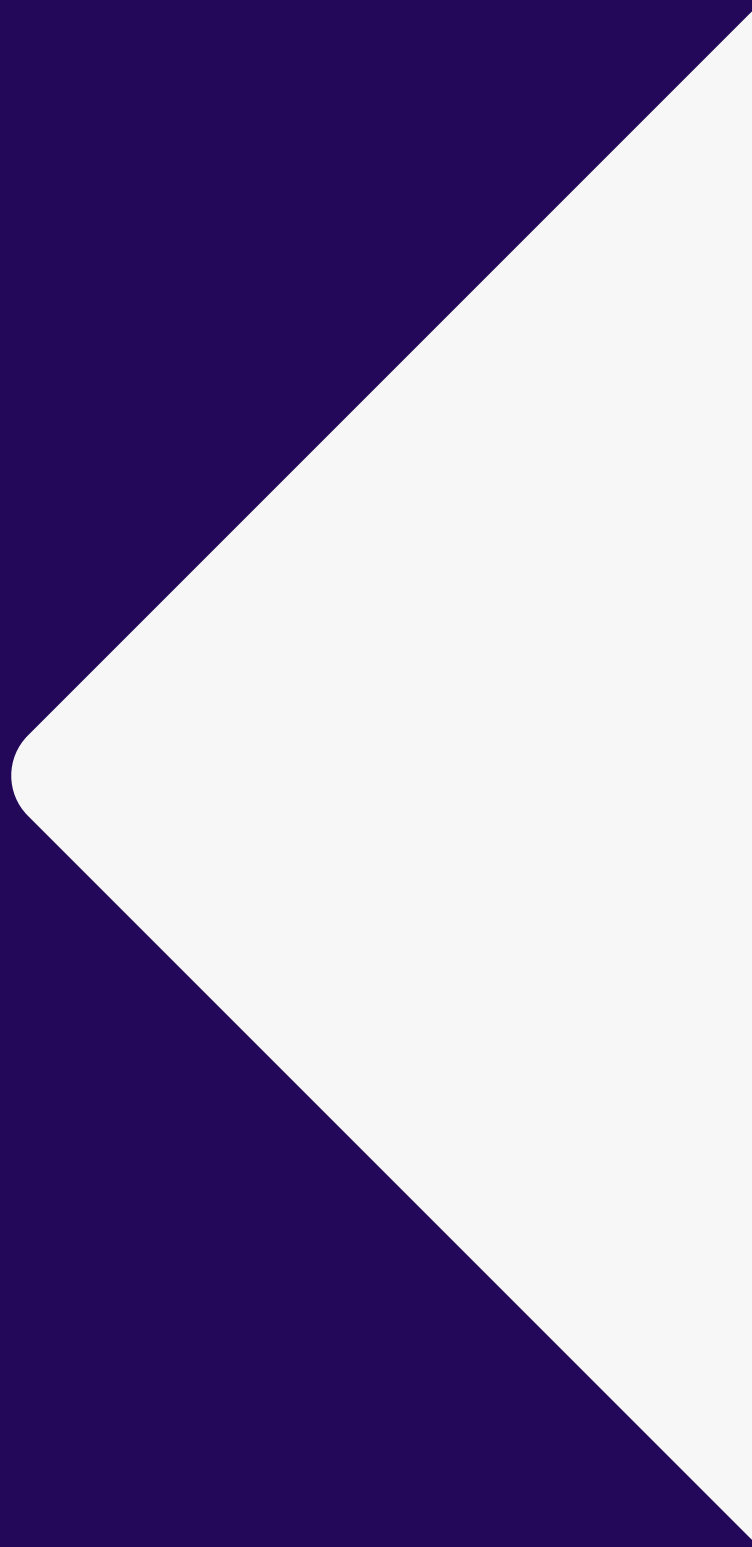
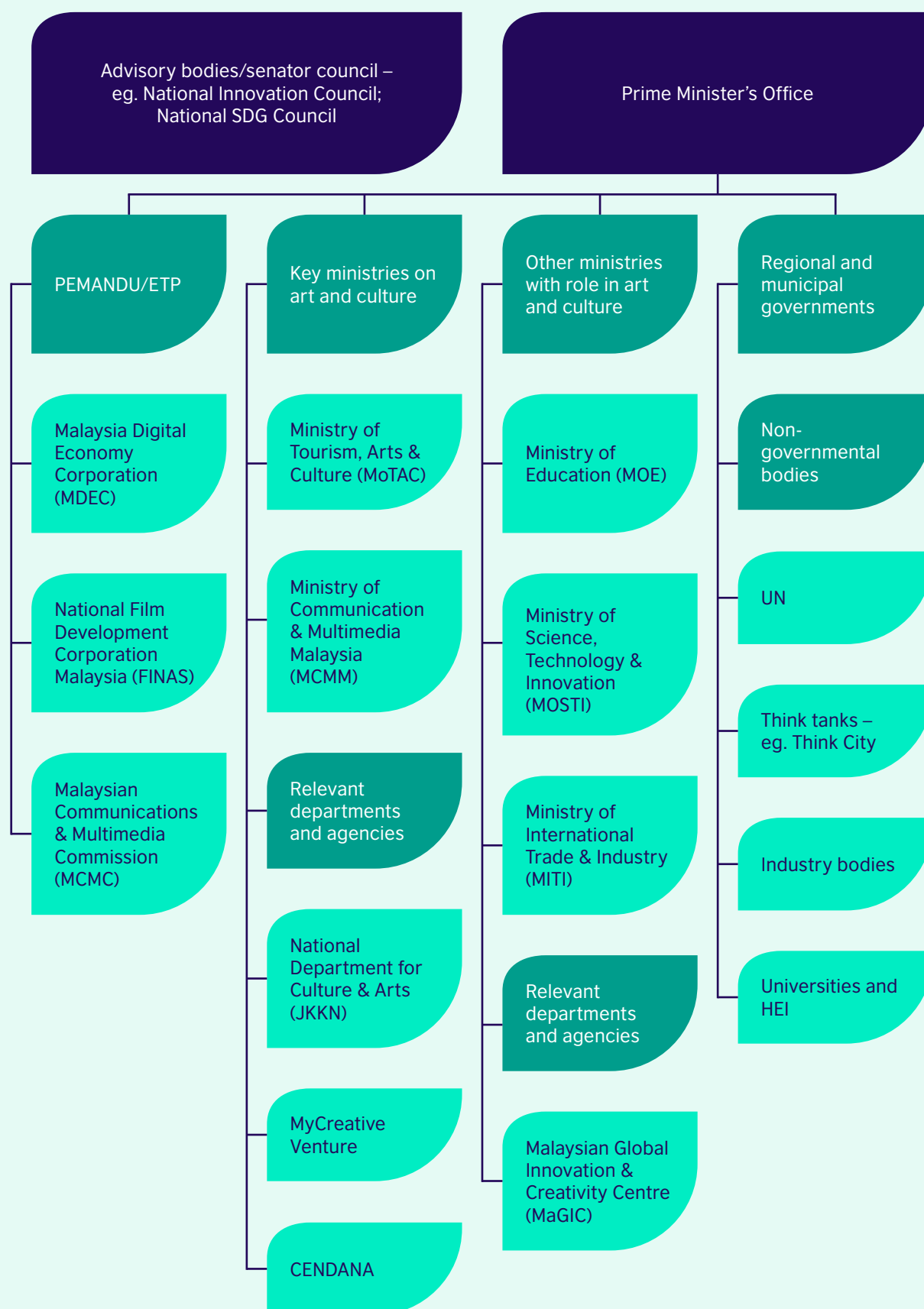


Figure 7 Shape of Cultural Governance



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Literature

Activities in the wider literature sector according to the Department of Statistics:

Scope 1

- 581: Publishing of books, periodicals and other publishing activities including
- 58190 Publishing of catalogues, forms, posters
- 58110 Publishing of books, brochures and other publications
- 58130 Publishing of newspapers, journals, magazines and periodicals in print and electronic form
- 582 Software publishing
- 58202 Computer games for all platforms

Scope 2: Culture Art Creative Industry

- 181 Printing and service activities related to printing

Scope 3: Culture Heritage

- 910 Libraries, Archives, museums and other cultural activities
- 91011: Documentation and information activities of libraries of all kinds
- 91012: Stock photo libraries and services
- 91021: Operation of museums of all kinds
- 91022: Operation of historical sites and buildings

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