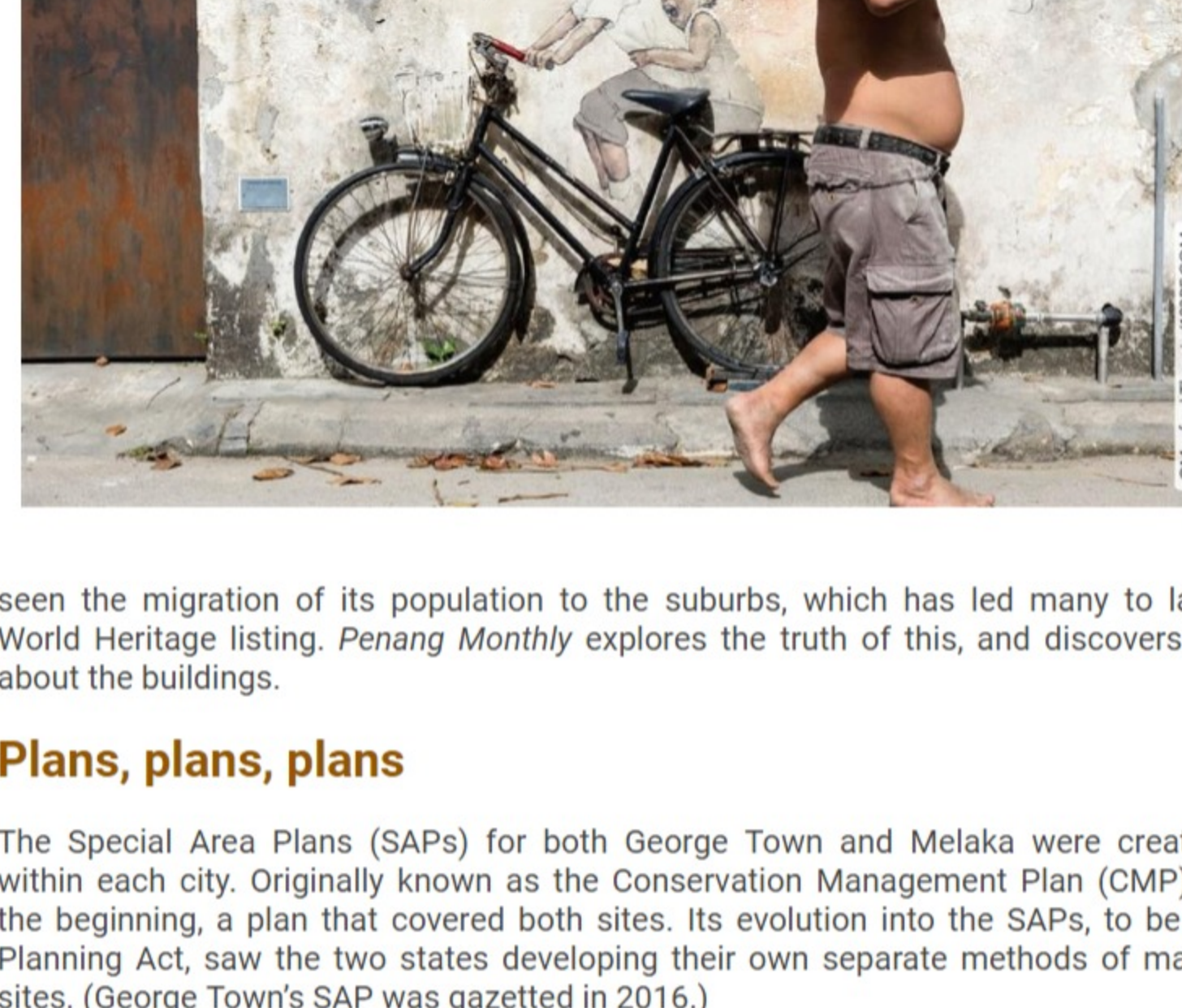


Handling the Intangibles: Heritage Management in George Town

By Jeremy Tan and Julia Tan July 2019

COVER STORY



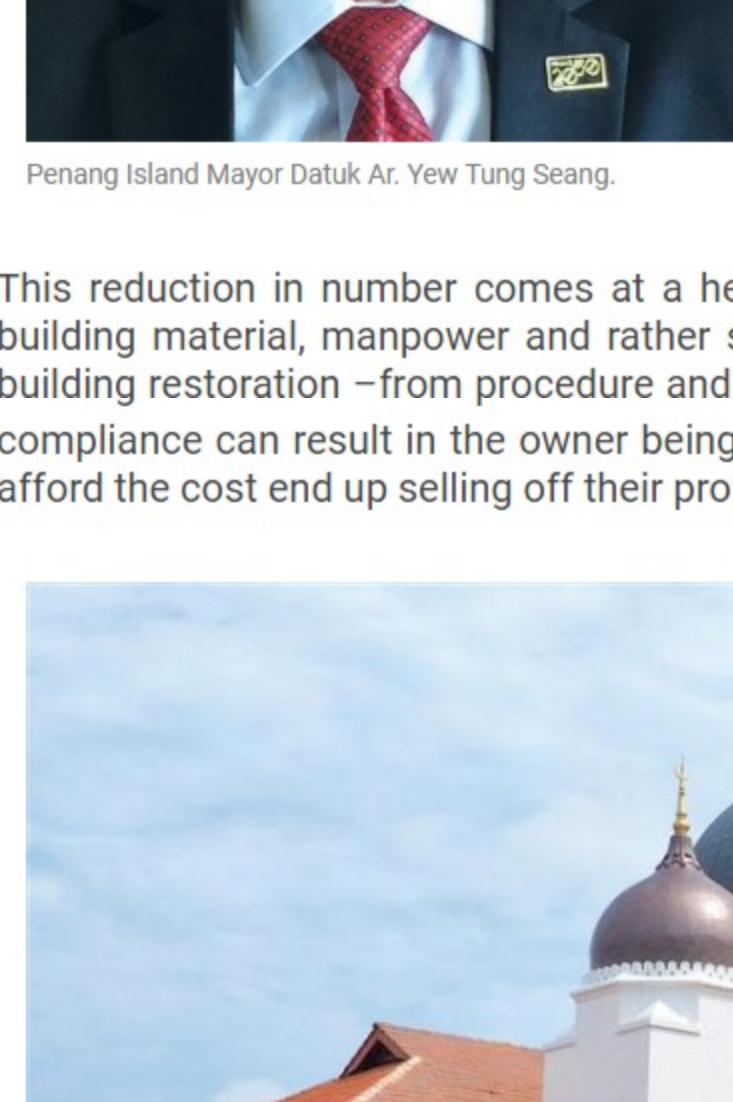
The road to becoming a World Heritage site was not easy for George Town and Melaka...

While the initial exhibition has succeeded, many have ridden on the popularity of both sites...

At the same time, George Town has seen the migration of its population to the suburbs...

Plans, plans, plans

The Special Area Plans (SAPs) for both George Town and Melaka were created to guide and control development within each city...



Penang Island Mayor Datuk Az. Yew Tng Seang

The most obvious aspect within the SAP is building conservation, which is clearly outlined...

Even before restoration begins, a baseline study is carried out to go over the building's characteristics...



Masjid Kapitan Keling's dome was restored with funds from Think City.

As a shortcut, the use of the uninitiated turn to modern materials such as cement without understanding that that can bring further detriment to the integrity of the building...

The skills needed to work with such material, however, are hard to find. "If we're lucky, we get some senior workers who know how to work with lime..."



Dr Ang Ming Chee (6th from left) with George Town World Heritage Incorporated staff and members of the George Town community.

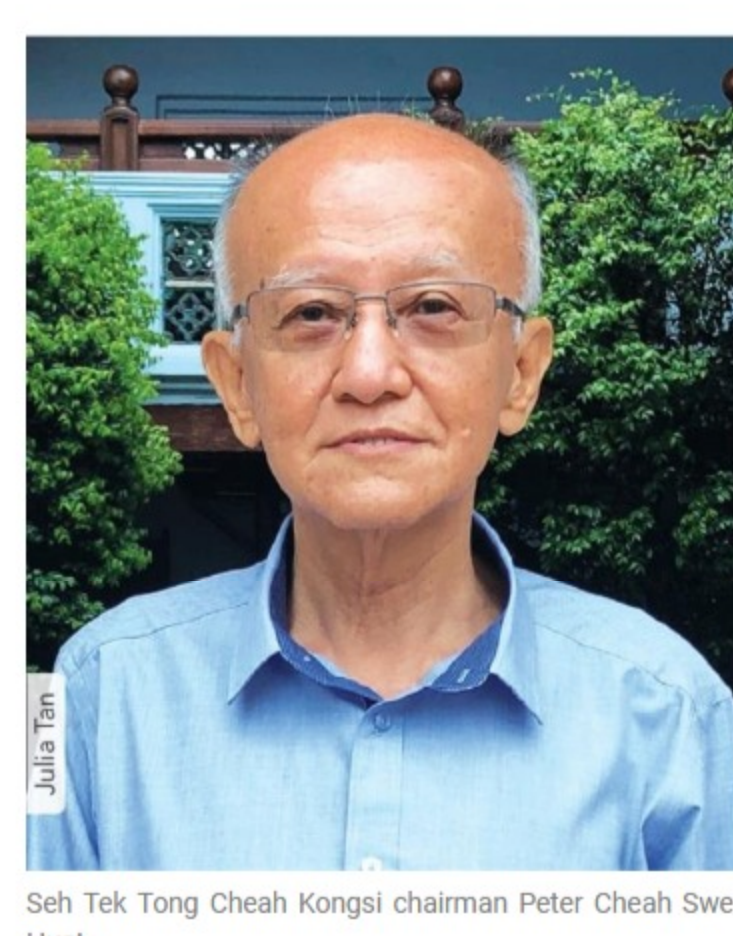
Funding

In countries like China, owners of heritage buildings can apply for grants to alleviate restoration costs.

"We launched the George Town Heritage Habitat Seed Fund last year and are now working with the owners who have rented out their premises to long-term tenants at very low rates..."

general manager of George Town World Heritage Incorporated (GTWHI), the state heritage agency spearheading in safeguarding the Outstanding Universal Values (OUVs) of the George Town World Heritage site.

We have so many different people who live here and work here. Many are willing to move back, so the incentives should be shared with all to encourage everyone to get involved in heritage management.



Seh Tek Tong Cheah Kongsi chairman Peter Cheah Swee Hui.

"A lot of them are trustees, kongsi, wakaf, and they are really very generous. We want to acknowledge the contributions of these owners..."

For the past 11 years, federal funding has been channelled through Think City, a subsidiary of Khazanah Nasional Berhad.

"Funding from (the federal government) would definitely help because it's expensive to maintain a world heritage site. It would be very encouraging as well because it's not only resources that they're giving out..."

willing to move back, so the incentives should be shared with all to encourage everyone to get involved in heritage management. We hope the government will look into the bigger picture for tax reduction and incentives for those who contribute to heritage conservation..."

Rent: A Misconception

While there has been much buzz over evictions in George Town, there are of course differing views on the matter...

In an earlier interview, Ang shared that GTWHI performed a house-to-house survey in 2016 and 2017 which revealed rather surprising findings.

Ceiling-high rent takes much of the blame, especially with the repeal of the Rent Control Act in 1997.

"We've also met a lot of tenants who refuse to hand over the premises even though their businesses can no longer survive. We are sympathetic, but some tenants owe up to RM20,000 in rent arrears, which is too much..."

Not all tenants leave unwillingly. Cheah observes that residents have been moving in and out of Cheah Kongsi properties even before 2008.

Loh, whose family owns a few properties in George Town, has also seen tenants returning to the keys.

"If you look at the history of a commercial street - Jalan Penang, Lebuh Bishop, Lebuh Chulia - they may have changed hands several times over the past two centuries..."

Loh is conscientious about who rents a property. "There was a tenant who used the building as a storehouse. They didn't take care of the property - there were rats and everything..."

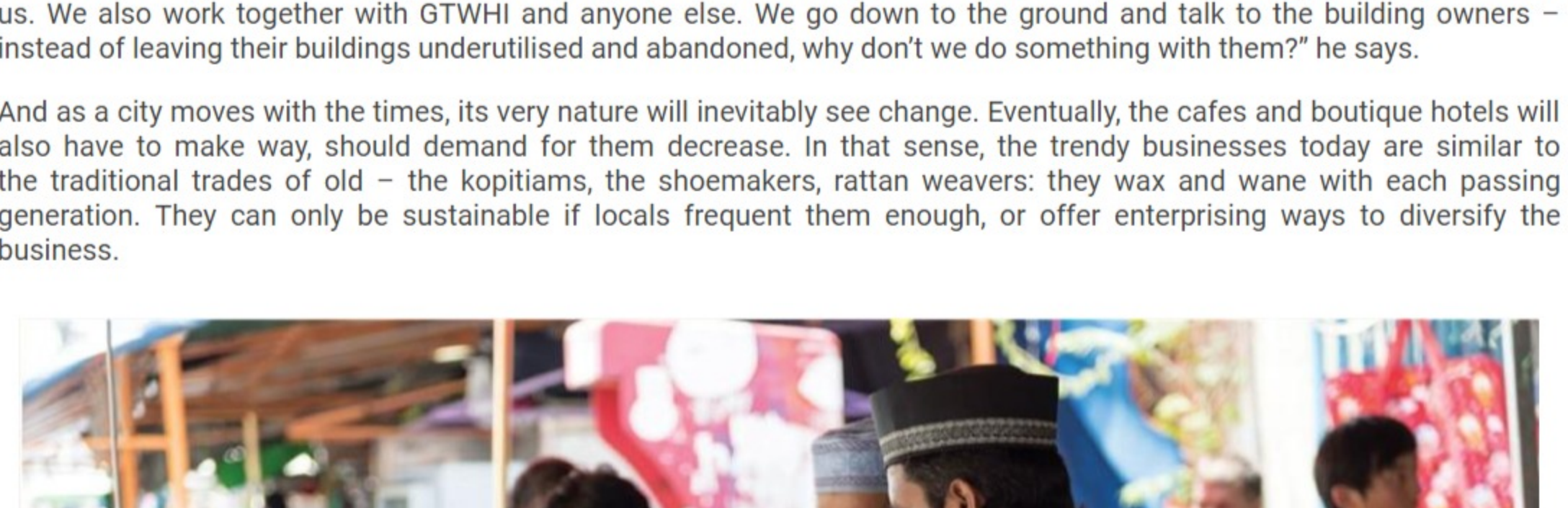
Brisk Businesses

The coming and going of people, businesses, trades, lead to the question of the gentrification of George Town.

"People see opportunities. We have the SAP to control matters like the boutique hotels. There are certain areas where you can have hotels, and certain areas where you can have other forms of activities..."

"In terms of building usage, we don't want to see the whole city converted into a hotel; that's why we're encouraging private owners to go for residential units instead."

And as a city moves with the times, its very nature will inevitably see change. Eventually, the cafes and boutique hotels will also have to make way, should demand for them decrease.



Street vendors selling nasi kandar, part of George Town's food heritage.

In terms of building usage, we don't want to see the whole city converted into a hotel; that's why we're encouraging private owners to go for residential units instead.

"Let's take it from the government's point of view, or from an institutional point of view, offers Loh. "Can we nurture them, bring them up a notch? Some do well and expand because they're more enterprising..."

"I think what the state should have done is that as much as they nurture science and industry, they should have found a way to teach our people how to carry out business in a cultural context..."

(Re)populating George Town In light of the changes George Town is seeing, an update of its SAP is due...

But what sort of new residents does George Town today attract - perhaps more importantly, who do the state want to attract?"

"We want to start with the students first," says Yew, "so that with support of the youngsters, we can have a vibrant and smart city full of young talent."

"Hopefully the young can help pull in their peers together to make the city workable and liveable. It's their cleanliness and safety, you can talk to us and we'll help you. The important thing is that the young must come in - we need more talents for the future..."

SENTRAL College Penang is one of the educational facilities located within the World Heritage site, having been around long before the Unesco inscription.

Into the Future

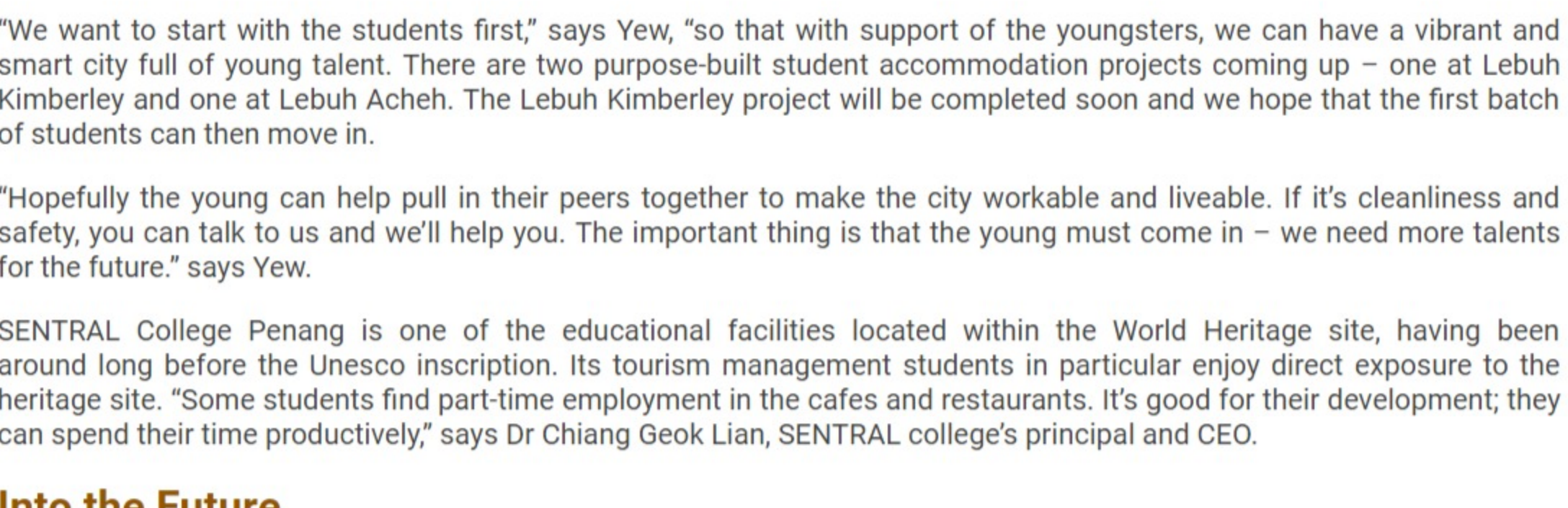
Apart from the necessary documenting of intangible heritage that the various groups - from GTWHI to Think City and PHT, to name a few - are doing, it is crucial that for intangible heritage to survive, the younger generation has to get involved.

One of the ways this can be done is through heritage education. Organisations such as Arts-ED, a non-profit organisation which aims to provide innovative community-based arts and culture education in rural and urban communities, are trying to build awareness - and it begins with breaking the stereotype of "heritage" among the young.

"They're kids, you know?" points out Chen Yoke Pin, senior manager of Arts-ED. "We try to use 'cool' ways to make heritage attractive, such as drama and photography."

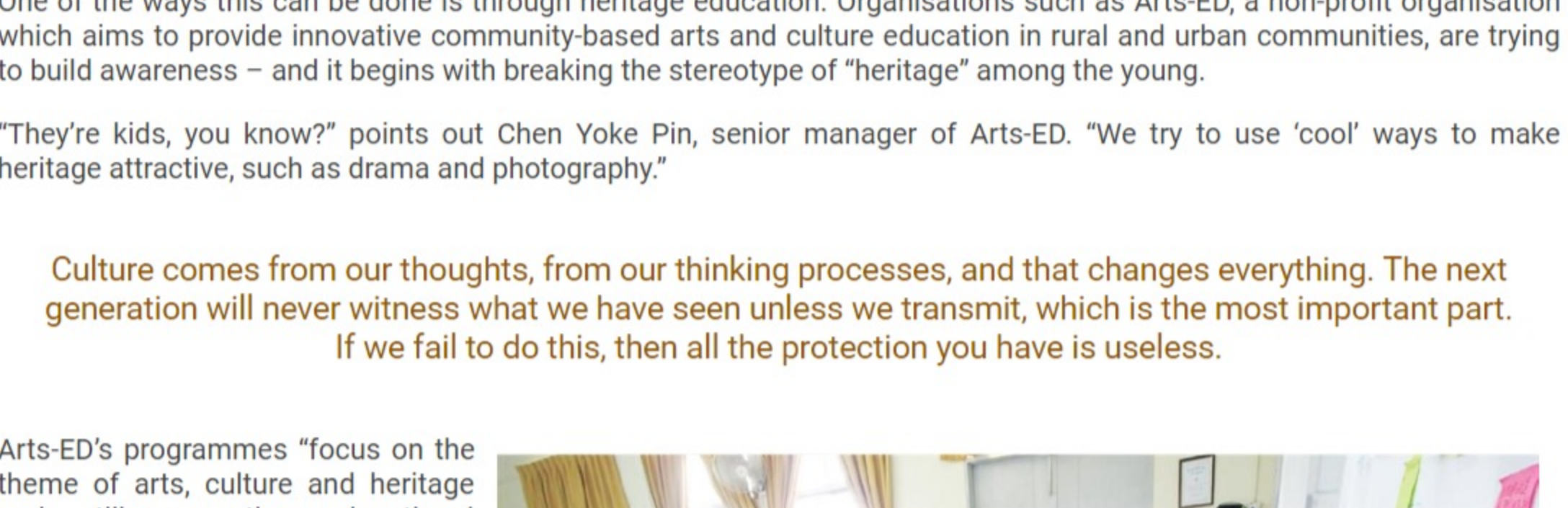
Culture comes from our thoughts, from our thinking processes, and that changes everything. The next generation will never witness what we have seen unless we transmit, which is the most important part. If we fail to do this, then all the protection you have is useless.

Arts-ED's programmes "focus on the theme of arts, culture and heritage and utilise creative educational approaches that encourage learning around real issues..."



Foo Wei Meng at work.

There's a stark difference when it comes to cultural heritage education in other countries. "Taiwan and Hong Kong already have very matured courses looking at interdisciplinary areas such as architecture..."



Students interviewing the second-hand bookstore owner about his trade history.

It cannot be just about getting the grade. The impact with culture is, you can't just talk about it and not do it..."

"So we've turned it into a value-based approach - let's take a dance as an example," says Chen. "You don't necessarily have to maintain the form; you have to understand the value of it first..."

What's important now is not just emphasising the importance of heritage to the young, but how the young can take ownership of heritage in their own personal lives; and how they can come up with their own ways to appreciate and to write the next chapter in the story.

For sustainability, you have to involve the people. If people don't have that sense of ownership - if they don't feel it's theirs - then they won't do it. In George Town, after we committed to creative industry projects, we found that it works because the people we engage want to do this.

"Culture comes from our thoughts, from our thinking processes, and that changes everything," says Loh. "The next generation will never witness what we have seen unless we transmit, which is the most important part. If we fail to do this, then all the protection you have is useless."

Jeremy Tan is a mass communications student whose passion lies in Japanese language and culture. He hopes to one day visit the land of the rising sun. He is also frighteningly fond of cats.

1 http://www.gtwhi.com.my/images/pdfs/20161116-2004%20-%20Technical%20Review%20Panel%20-%20How%20to%20Get%20the%20Dome%20Within%20100%20Days.pdf.

2 Melaka's state government works with the Museum Department to allocate funds for house owners.

3 www.arts-ed.my/what-we-do.

4 Ibid.

5 www.arts-ed.my/creative-arts-education/2019/11/10/cultural-heritage-education-programme-cheh.

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