

Preface

This book is about large-scale urban redevelopment projects that have been developing in Penang, Malaysia, over the past decade, and the participatory governance initiatives that have been organized to challenge them. It examines, in particular, the discourses that have been mobilized in support of the state government's development plans, as well as those used to contest them, and propose alternatives. Research for the book formally began at the National University of Singapore in 2016, when I began a postdoctoral fellowship at the Asia Research Institute. However, its seeds started germinating during my doctoral research in Penang on a separate research project on the controversies over the farming of edible birds' nests in George Town and other Malaysian cities (2013–14). While I was in Penang, I unwittingly developed research contacts that would become central to inspiring the research for this book. Although I was largely unaware of it at the time, the plans for the Penang Transport Master Plan (PTMP) developed at this time, which soon took precedence over the 'swiftlet farming' controversy that I had been tracing for my PhD research.

Many of the key figures that have been involved in contesting the state government's plans for the PTMP and developing alternatives were also those involved in advocacy against the indiscriminate swiftlet farming in George Town. This included the former president of the Penang Forum, Khoo Salma, who was a key interlocutor in the development of the research presented here. Khoo subsequently introduced me to other members of the Penang Forum who had been involved in various social movements and advocacy work which helped enhance my understanding of a variety of issues in Penang that will be discussed in the subsequent chapters.

The research documented in this book also required expanding my familiarity with Penang, beyond the confines of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site which I had been focused on until then. I therefore spent many days in the early part of 2017 exploring the forested hillsides, coastlines and neighbourhoods that are discussed at length in this book. It also required learning about a range of topics and debates that were erstwhile beyond my scholarly expertise and interests, including transportation infrastructure;

‘natural’ hazards like flooding and landslides; and land reclamation. This took some time, and has added considerable breadth and interdisciplinarity to my research profile. However, some of the underlying themes from my doctoral research have remained central to this book project, namely: heritage; governance; planning; social justice; and activism.

My research also spanned several political changes in Penang, and Malaysia more broadly. I initially interviewed Chief Minister Chow Kon Yeow (who was then State Executive Officer for Local Government, Traffic Management and Flood Mitigation) for my swiftlet farming research, which introduced me first-hand to the fraught relationship between government and civil society in Penang. I interviewed him again in 2017 for my research on the PTMP, when he explained the government’s vision of a ‘cleaner and greener’ Penang, which preceded the current ‘green and smart’ state agenda. The former Chief Minister, Lim Guan Eng, later went on to be Finance Minister of Malaysia in 2018 when the Pakatan Harapan Coalition took power at the federal level. This gave the state government much more power at the local level, but it was short-lived due to the collapse of the government in 2019. This political context and its significance is discussed in more detail in the introduction.

The idea to write a monograph on this research didn’t emerge until part way through my postdoctoral stint in Singapore. Unlike my PhD research, the processes, controversies and debates analysed here did not stop at the conclusion of my postdoctoral research. Therefore, I continued to follow developments in my ‘spare time’, after I returned to the UK to take up my first permanent academic position at the University of Lincoln. My delay in securing research funding for new projects helped. However, it became much more difficult to follow the changes occurring in Penang, as it was no longer an hour’s flight, or day-long bus ride away. This was further challenged in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which made it impossible for me to return to Penang as planned while I was finishing the writing for this book. Therefore, the social media networks and chat groups that I had joined during my earlier visits to Penang became pivotal to completing this research. The conversion of what were formerly local seminars to live-streamed events was also helpful. Nonetheless, while this book had a relatively firm deadline, the development projects and governance initiatives traced here do not, many of which will continue to evolve well beyond this book’s publication.

Notwithstanding, the governance initiatives, political dynamics and landscape transformations discussed in the book, and the theoretical insights gleaned from them, should have continued relevance, and not only for Penang or Malaysia. Rather, as highlighted explicitly in [Chapter 7](#), many of the processes identified in Penang have uncanny parallels in other parts of urbanizing Southeast Asia, and beyond. It is hoped that the book will therefore have relevance for like-minded students and scholars in geography and urban studies, regardless of their empirical focus.