

Rantau & Rindu: Insights into the Lived Experiences of Penang People

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ABSTRACT

An important part of social reality is the collective experiences of individuals within a particular community. This research shines a light onto the social reality of the people of Penang, Malaysia through the lens of the lived experiences of ordinary people. Penang, Malaysia is a microcosm of Southeast Asia characterized by her maritime trade, human migration, linguistic diversity and cultural integration. This study adopts a methodology of narrative research and life story in capturing people's lived experiences. Narrative research is adopted as this study utilizes the stories narrated by the people themselves. Life story approach is a qualitative research tool from the discipline of anthropology that focuses on individual's lived experiences. Thirty (30) respondents shared their life stories on their experiences as a Penang person. These respondents are ordinary people from a wide cross-section of society, collectively providing diverse and nuanced perspectives and experiences. Thematic analysis reveals several themes capturing and interpreting Penang as a place of comfort, food, family, friendships and experiences of racism when overseas. These emergent themes are subsequently aggregated into two meta-themes of *Rantau* (wandering away from home) and *Rindu* (missing home). Collectively, the life stories, emergent themes and meta-themes depict the camaraderie, spirit, audacity, tenacity and adaptability of the Penang people. At an ontological level, the emic perspectives reveal a deep and rich understanding of what it means to be a Penang person, a Malaysian and a member of the Southeast Asian community, contributing to the discourses of the Penang identity, *Perantau* (diaspora) and social reality. Implications of this research are that the practice of *Perantau* has spread beyond the Minangkabau and Bugis cultures they are historically associated with and is now embraced by Penang people, and therefore, a fresh perspective of the social reality of Southeast Asia is warranted.

Keywords: Life Stories, Malaysia, Narrative Research, Penang, Thematic Analysis

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INTRODUCTION

This research investigates society from the lens of ordinary individuals with the theoretical framework of symbolic-interaction theory. Symbolic-interaction theory has a micro-level orientation that sees society as the product of countless everyday ongoing interactions of individuals (Macdonald, 2014). These myriad everyday interactions collectively become the lived experiences of individuals. The lived experiences of individuals woven together then become the multi-layered fabric of society in which social reality takes form. This research delves into the social reality of the people of Penang, Malaysia through their diverse and colorful life stories.

This research builds upon material from two (2) books: *Penang People: An Anthology of Life Stories* (2022) and *Penang People 2: Diaspora* (2023). Both these books are self-published under Creative Commons by the first author of this article. Collectively, these two books contain thirty (30) life stories and are written for general readership. These life stories are from respondents connected to Penang either by birth or residence and depict their lived experiences interacting with places and peoples within and without Penang. This current article explores these thirty (30) life stories from an academic and scholarly perspective by analyzing and interpreting the contents of these books under the overarching theoretical framework of symbolic-interaction theory.

Particular emphasis is placed on respondents who have travelled outside of Penang to study or work. Subsequently, they may return to Penang or remain outside to form the Penang diaspora. Studying, working and living outside of Penang provides an insightful reflective lens as one has a basis of comparison and can better

contextualize the experiences of being a Penang person. As such, the ontology of being a Penang person is revealed and a more meaningful perspective and deeper understanding obtained.

BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Social science research commonly adopts macro-level-oriented theories such as structural-functional theory and social-conflict theory (Macionis, 2014). Syed Hussain Alatas' influential concept of "intellectual imperialism" is founded on social-conflict theory (Alatas, 2000). Alatas was concerned with the effect of foreign ideas and values brought by colonialism onto indigenous societies and subsequently advocated the development of an autonomous and independent social science tradition for Asia (Alatas, 2000). Recent iterations include using social-conflict theory to explain various phenomena of social change that occur in society (Prayogi, 2023).

Scholars from the field of political science are also concerned with the impact of foreign ideas and values onto indigenous societies but see the popularity and prominence of the neoliberal state model as the main culprit. The neoliberal state model is founded on structural-functional theory and advocates globalization, free markets and private capital flows to the extent that it is "diminishing the significance of national identity and sovereignty in the current epoch" (Hague, 2008). The neoliberal state model is adopted by many Southeast Asian countries including Malaysia as observed by Alice M. Nah with regards to the rights of workers (Nah, 2012) and in Indonesia as observed by Andrew McWilliam with regards to decentralization and democratization policies (McWilliam, 2011).

This current research adopts a different approach, that of micro-level oriented theoretical framework of symbolic-interaction theory (Macionis, 2014). Symbolic-interaction posits that social reality is made up of many personal interactions among individuals that collectively construct the social reality of a community or society. Interwoven into symbolic-interaction are myriad, diverse and different individual experiences, each valid by itself and contributing toward the collective narrative (Macionis, 2014). George Herbert Mead, the founding father of symbolic-interaction theory conceived of people as made up of interactions of "Mind, Self and Society" (Mead, 1934). "Mind and Self" is the individual while "Society" is the environment where all these interactions take place. Other prominent sociologists such as Charles Horton Cooley, Herbert Blumer and Erving Goffman have further developed this theory, notably in adding environmental and psychological dimensions (Husin et al., 2021). Symbolic-interaction theory complements the macro-level structural-functional and social-conflict theories for a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of society.

The publications on which this research is based on, *Penang People: An Anthology of Life Stories* (2022) and *Penang People 2: Diaspora* (2023), are based on the format similar to *Dubliners* (1914), *Taipei People* (1971), *Life Stories of Soviet Women the Interwar Generation* (2013) and *Humans of New York* (2013). In all these publications, life stories of ordinary people as opposed to famous leaders or personalities are collected and recorded. Famous leaders and personalities undoubtedly contribute significantly towards society and often have their life stories recounted in personal autobiographies and even in movies. Nonetheless, in any given community or society, they form but a small fraction of its members whose majority are ordinary people. Therefore, it is asserted that social reality is predominantly driven by the lived experience of ordinary people as depicted in their life stories.

A common denominator is a physical place that connects and contextualizes all the life stories, as articulated in the concept of "Place Identity" (Gieseking et al, 2014; Peng et al, 2020). Through the life stories, the social reality of a physical place is portrayed giving it life and character. The physical place influences the life stories of people, and in return people influence the development of a physical place. This bi-directional influence of physical place and people create dynamic, anthropological constructs that stretches across time, physicality, geography, people, practices, customs, beliefs, foods, languages and philosophy. In this context, "Penang", "Dublin", "Taipei", etc. becomes an anthropological amalgamation of place and people.

Geographically, Penang comprise an island on the Straits of Malacca and part of the mainland in Peninsular Malaysia. Historically, Penang has always been open to international maritime trade and embraces people from all over the world. With various peoples comes diverse cultures, and subsequent inter-mingling creates localized dialects, foods and customs. Penang from its early beginnings and subsequently throughout its colonial period accepted and practiced multiculturalism (Ooi, 2015). Prior to 1941, before the advent of World War II and subsequent formation of modern nation-states, the potpourri of diversity produced disparate identities among Penang people (Ooi, 2015). Subsequently, upon becoming part of the modern nation-state of Malaysia, Penang gradually developed an identity derived from but distinct from its multicultural roots (Zabielskis, 2008). This

research re-examines this contemporary construct of “Penang people” and illuminates the social reality of its members.

The emergent themes from this research are further analysed and consolidated via Alfred Schutz’s (1954) concept of typifications. Typifications involve deconstructing the emergent themes into their fundamental components, and from these fundamental components seek patterns or commonalities, which are then reconstructed and reconstituted into typologies. Typologies customarily refer to specific individuals. In this research, the term ‘meta-theme’ that reduce or combine the many themes into their fundamental components (Wong et al., 2020) is deemed a more appropriate term as it describes the convergence and composition of several emergent themes. These meta-themes provide a clearer and more holistic understanding of the phenomena researched and provide guidance for formulating public policy recommendations.

METHOD

The research methodology is composed of 2 phases. The initial phase resides in the compilation of the books *Penang People: An Anthology of Life Stories* (2022) and *Penang People 2: Diaspora* (2023) whereby life story approach is utilized. Life story approach is a qualitative research approach from the field of anthropology that emphasizes an individual’s lived experiences from his or her perspective (Reid et al, 2004). The act of telling a story is “a natural way of recounting experience, a practical solution to a fundamental problem in life, creating reasonable order out of experience” (Moen, 2006). Life stories as a research methodology have a rich history as a classical component of ethnography and fieldwork studies in anthropology (Peacock & Holland, 1993). Life stories methodology is also widely used in research on psychology (McAdams, 2001), child development (Hammond et al, 2020) and cultural practices (Minowa & Belk, 2020).

In this research, respondents were contacted electronically and requested to share their life stories in writing. They have the freedom and flexibility to creatively construct their life stories, guided by the following prompts:

- a) To share background and life history
- b) To share daily life, interactions and experiences.
- c) To share impressions, thoughts, feelings, aspirations, beliefs and worldviews.
- d) To share reflections and ruminations on being a Penang person.

Respondents can remain anonymous for greater freedom of expression and latitude in broaching sensitive topics. A total of thirty (30) life stories were obtained out of eighty-one (81) respondents contacted using purposive sampling, giving a response rate of 37%. The majority of these respondents are acquaintances of the first author with the rest obtained from recommendations by respondents (snowballing). Respondents are selected based on the criteria of ethnicity, age, gender, vocation and experience living abroad. The final thirty (30) respondents were obtained based on their willingness to share their life stories and submitting their narratives in writing. The profile of the respondents is shown in Table 1:

Table 1: Profile of Respondents

1. Age	20-30 years	26.7%
	30-40 years	23.3%
	40 years and above	50%
2 Ethnicity	Chinese	80%
	Malay	6.7%
	India	6.7%
	Others	6.7%
3 Gender	Female	60%
	Male	40%
4 Occupation	Executive	36.7%
	Teacher/Lecturer/Professor	33.3%
	Student	23.3%
	Social Worker	6.7%

It is noted and acknowledged that the respondent pool is skewed towards English-proficient and tertiary-educated individuals, and as such, do not statistically represent all Penang people nor are they meant to be.

The second phase of the research methodology consists of narrative research on the raw data of the life stories. Narrative research or narrative inquiry involves analyzing narrative material such as life stories and categorizing or interpreting them (Squire et al, 2014). Narrative research offers rich insights into lived experiences, shed light onto the meaning of personal experiences, offers insights into the trajectory of life across time, focuses on both the personal and the social, and give insights into what life is like as embodied human beings (Carless & Douglas, 2017). This narrative research utilizes thematic analysis as articulated by Braun & Clarke (2006). This combination is deemed most appropriate to systematically analyze and consolidate the life stories into meaningful themes and meta-themes (Creswell, 1998). As the research orientation is inductive, there are no hypothesized themes a priori to the analysis of the data. Theoretical saturation was achieved when emergent themes started repeating themselves. Specifically, the second to last emergent theme occurred in Life Story 8 and the last emergent theme in Life Story 21. Subsequent Life Stories witnessed the continuous repetition of emergent themes that have already occurred indicating saturation.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The life stories were collected from 2022 to 2023 and were all composed in English. Lengths and formats of each life story vary as respondents were allowed the latitude to personalize their life stories in a manner they are most comfortable with. The life stories were collectively analyzed and evaluated by both authors for a wider range of perspectives and to minimize individual biases. Expertise and views of other scholars were also sought as required, particularly in the subsequent analysis and discussions. The emergent themes from the thirty (30) life stories are shown in Table 2 in the Appendix. The twelve (12) themes that emerged are as follows with excerpts in italics:

Theme 1: Reminiscence of the past/childhood/youth/simpler times

A common recurring theme is that of reminiscence of the past seen through rose-tinted lenses. The past contains the respondents' childhood and youth, and they recount childhood games and carefree days growing up in simpler times before the advent of adulthood and its accompanying responsibilities and complexities.

"As I grew older, I started to develop an affinity towards the toy boxes of Ding Dang and Tora. I relished in the past memories of me unboxing the boxes, eating the small round chocolate biscuits while playing with my new toy. In my recollection, those chocolates were some of the best that I had ever eaten". (Life Story 1)

Theme 2: Connectivity with homes and places

A strong affinity and connectivity are shown towards physical places such as childhood homes or areas within Penang, such as the waterfront or a neighbourhood. These physical places hold a special meaning to the respondents and contribute to their identification as Penang people.

"My parents were both working in Perak at the time, and were in Penang to visit my maternal grandparents. According to my mother, this was the time that I insisted on being born despite their plan to have me in Perak - and so it came to be, my parents rushed over to the Hospital Bersalin Pulau Pinang and I was born in the very heart of Penang". (Life Story 5)

Theme 3: Appreciation/acknowledgment of family ties

Family ties and relationships are prominent concerns. The nature of these family ties may be varied to include affection, gratitude, guilt or stress, but they all showcase the important role of family ties in their lived experience as Penang people.

"My fondest childhood memory was of playing in my aunt's garden. In a family of six children, she was the third oldest – san gu; my father is the youngest and only male. San Gu was never married and, since I was born, had lived with my grandmother on the ground floor of a tiny two-bedroom flat in Jalan Tengah until the day she died". (Life Story 7)

Theme 4: Dreams and ambitions in life

Dreams and ambitions in life are depicted reflecting a forward and future orientation. There is an intrinsic desire to improve one's lot in life. Effort, hard work and sacrifices are made to realize one's dreams and ambitions.

“Helping people has always run deep inside me. I too love adventures and therefore scouting would be the most appropriate uniform curriculum activity during my school days....it was a difficult decision choosing helping people versus scouting adventures. Somehow, I enrolled as a member of Red Cross Society (now called Red Crescent Society). Passionate and dedicated, I never missed any training and meeting which eventually got me promoted as a Head Section Leader (equivalent as a Chairperson of Red Cross Society in that school). (Life Story 4)

Theme 5: Wanderlust and wanderings outside of Penang

There is an implicit sense of wanderlust to explore and travel outside of Penang to gain experiences, skills, knowledge and wealth. Acting upon this wanderlust, respondents wandered, travelled and lived in various countries. They may opt to remain outside of Penang, plan to eventually return or have already returned.

“The above story resonates with me as I reflect on my experiences studying and living overseas as part of the Penang diaspora. I was in 3 different countries on 3 different continents, many events were serendipitous, and situations that initially seemed unfortunate could turn out otherwise” (Life Story 29)

Theme 6: Reflections and appreciation of Penang after being away

A sense of appreciation of Penang is expressed by respondents who have been away. By being away and outside of Penang, comparisons could be made, and the resulting reflections show a sense of appreciation implicitly or explicitly.

“I may have left Penang, but Penang never left me. I had an amazing experience in the UK and Thailand and have many friends in both countries. Home is wherever I live at the time, but Penang will always hold a special place in my heart - and my stomach”. (Life Story 25)

Theme 7: Ruminations on Penang food and people

Ruminations are made on Penang’s diverse foods and the characteristics of the people. These ruminations suggest the important place food and people have in the respondents’ lived experience as a Penang person.

“It was awesome growing up in the small island of Penang. Once a Penang “Lang” (local Hokkien word for “people”) always a Penang Lang! I remember growing up, my parents used to take me for breakfast at Lebuhr Macallum for the famous Ali Nasi Lemak where the sambal was to die for, or to Ramzan for a good plate of ‘dua roti canai cincang kuah banjir’ (two roti canais that have been cut into pieces and the curry is poured directly on them). I will be covering these later on in this short story of my life. These were the best times as I began to really appreciate the good taste of Penang food. (Life Story 10)

Theme 8: Appreciation of language diversity

Appreciation is expressed for Penang’s language diversity, and implicitly her multiculturalism. This appreciation is particularly pronounced when respondents are away from Penang and benefit from being multilingual and multicultural.

“On the other hand, the average American may find some of my ways strange. I do not wear shoes in the house (and I make everyone else take their shoes off too); my family eats Jasmine (Asian) rice every day for dinner, and I occasionally listen to Hokkien songs and Bahasa Malaysia songs (thanks to YouTube). (Life Story 28)

Theme 9: Feeling of Penang as home and place of comfort

Penang is portrayed as a safe space and haven of comfort, recuperation and rejuvenation. Contributing to this experience is the familiarity of her physical places, the food and the congenial nature of her people.

“As the days passed by, my circle of friends grew bigger and invitations to lunch grew more frequent. My social guard wasn’t up anymore, and I was able to find peace in just being who I was. The girl who was cast aside as a pariah in Ipoh was finally thriving with friends in Penang”. (Life Story 17)

Theme 10: Important role of education

Education plays a prominent role in the respondents' experiences and aspirations. Respondents invest considerable resources and travel outside of Penang in the pursuit of education.

"After completing my secondary school national examination (SPM) in Chemor, a small town in Perak, I searched for a private college to further my studies as was the norm as getting into a public university is relatively difficult due to the quota system. To be honest, it did not initially cross my mind that there are colleges and universities on the small island of Penang. As fate would have it, I ended up enrolled in a college in Penang for reasons such as convenience of transportation, social security, and affordability." (Life Story 16)

Theme 11: Sense of longing, nostalgia and inward journey of reflection

A distinct sense of longing or "hiraeth" as expressed by a respondent pervades. Accompanying is a sense of nostalgia that leads respondents towards an inward journey of reflection.

"As I watched the video clip, I thought about my grandmother, who ships her life savings and personal heirlooms off to a granddaughter she can only call after midnight on Thursdays and Fridays. I thought about how she always began the countdown to my annual trips home at least three months early and about how, even though she shed the most tears each time I left Penang, she had never once questioned or objected to my decision to live abroad. I don't think anyone will ever love me quite as selflessly and unconditionally as my grandmother does". (Life Story 8)

Theme 12: Challenges being outside of Penang

Being outside of Penang brings forth various challenges in terms of diet, weather, academics, relationships, racism, etc. Respondents are forced to contend with these challenges and adapt to living outside of Penang.

"There would be times when you would become so homesick that the pain you feel is palpable, like a wound in your heart with no known cure. You would try to distract yourself with schoolwork and make new friends but nothing can quite take away your overwhelming desire to hug your mom or taste her cooking from your home kitchen. You would sometimes close your eyes to imagine her smile just to make you feel better". (Life Story 13)

These twelve (12) themes are further analyzed and consolidated into two (2) main or meta-themes as follows:

Meta-theme 1: *Rantau*

Rantau is a Malay word that means wandering, journeying and travelling, and indirectly suggests wanderlust and a free spirit. In many traditional cultures, *Rantau* is also a rite of passage, whereby it becomes a journey of self-development, life-exploration and enrichment. The *Rantau* journey is expected to be full of trials and tribulations; nevertheless, is also seen as the maturing of the mind, soul and self. Along with these constructs, is the implicit notion of connection and contribution to society and family. The themes that coalesce into this meta-theme are (note that a theme may relate to more than one meta-theme):

- Theme 4 - Dreams and ambitions in life
- Theme 5 - Wanderlust and wanderings outside of Penang
- Theme 6 - Reflections and appreciation of Penang after being away
- Theme 8 - Appreciation of language diversity
- Theme 10 - Important role of education
- Theme 12 - Challenges being outside of Penang

Many Penang people have no qualms about travelling overseas and welcome opportunities to do so. They travel and journey widely for education and to gain knowledge, for career and business prospects, and to seek and explore opportunities for a better life. There is an underlying sense of wanderlust and implicit love for adventure and exploration. From their travels, experiences and challenges in foreign lands, an appreciation arises for Penang. Many respondents return to Penang after a sojourn overseas, and those who choose to remain overseas express and maintain strong emotional and familial attachments to Penang.

Meta-theme 2: *Rindu*

Rindu is a Malay word that means missing someone, something or someplace, with a feeling of heartache, nostalgia and sadness often due to a positive affection or experiential affiliation. The themes that coalesce into this meta-theme are:

Theme 1 - Reminiscence of the past/childhood/youth/simpler times
 Theme 2 - Connectivity with homes and places
 Theme 3 - Appreciation/acknowledgment of family ties
 Theme 6 - Reflections and appreciation of Penang after being away
 Theme 7 - Ruminations on Penang food and people
 Theme 9 - Feeling of Penang as home and place of comfort
 Theme 11 - Sense of longing, nostalgia and inward journey of reflection
 Theme 12 - Challenges being outside of Penang

There is a distinct feeling of sadness and longing for an existence that can no longer be attained. This existence includes carefree childhoods, simpler lifestyles, good friends, close family ties, comfort food and familiar places. As a result, there is heartache, nostalgia, a tinge of regret and an implicit acknowledgment that this is the price to pay for the progress of time.

All the themes, meta-themes and their relationships are depicted as follows:

Table 3: Themes and Meta-Themes

Themes	Meta-themes	
	Rantau	Rindu
1 Reminiscence of the past/childhood/youth/simpler times		/
2 Connectivity with homes and places		/
3 Appreciation/acknowledgment of family ties		/
4 Dreams and ambitions in life	/	
5 Wanderlust and wanderings outside of Penang	/	
6 Reflections and appreciation of Penang after being away	/	/
7 Ruminations on Penang food and people		/
8 Appreciation of language diversity	/	
9 Feeling of Penang as home and place of comfort		/
10 Important role of education	/	
11 Sense of longing, nostalgia and inward journey of reflection		/
12 Challenges being outside of Penang	/	/

DISCUSSION

The meta-themes of *Rantau* and *Rindu* are ironically and dialectically both complementary and contradictory. *Rindu* flows from *Rantau* as when one is away from Penang, a feeling of *Rindu* arises and one longs to be back. However, despite the presence of *Rindu* and its emotional consequences, Penang people continue to *Rantau* far and wide epitomizing an adventurous free spirit.

Merantau (the verb of *Rantau*) is a customary practice amongst many ethnic groups in Southeast Asia, most notably the Minangkabau (Bungo & Hassin, 2011; Bustami et al, 2022; Wang, 2001), Bugis (Himkayanti, 2022; Ahmad, 2016), Boyan and Dayak Laut (Salazar, 2016). People *merantau* voluntarily due to pull factors such as rite of passage, gaining status, pursuing knowledge, seeking wealth; and push factors such as economic hardship, conflicts and depletion of natural resources. The practice of *merantau* appears well-suited in the fluid and borderless maritime world of the Nusantara (Malay Archipelago) before the emergence of modern nation-states.

The findings from this research show that Penang people also subscribe to the tradition of *merantau*, consciously or subconsciously. Penang is a maritime city and Penang people are multi-ethnic from throughout the region. The Chinese form a large component of the Penang multi-ethnic mix, but it is notable that traditional values discouraged travel afar. Confucianist values dictate that men should be filial and loyal to their family and clan by staying at their ancestral homes. “The exhortation not to leave home was probably common to all agricultural societies”, noted prominent scholar Wang Gungwu (2001). Nonetheless, various factors prompted the Chinese to travel to many parts of Southeast Asia such as Penang. Wang Gungwu proceeded to provide a very comprehensive and insightful historical perspective on the migration of Chinese. Here in Penang, they probably found the culture of *merantau* as practiced by their Nusantara brethren amiable and aligned with it. This seemingly ironic, dialectical and ultimately symbiotic element of multi-cultural and multi-experiential perspective is the essence of Penang people who *merantau* abroad. As a key contribution to the literature of life stories, this perspective provides an inside view of social actors’ connection between the inner and outer worlds.

This juxtaposition of *Rantau* and *Rindu* among Penang people is reminiscent of the juxtaposition of “The Chrysanthemum and the Sword” famously used by Ruth Benedict (1946) to describe the Japanese people. In the said book, the Chrysanthemum represented the Japanese emperor and the Sword represented the military. Japanese people and their society of the period during World War 2 were depicted as revolving around these two cultural institutions that were complementary and at the same time contradictory. In similar vein, Penang people and society can be depicted as revolving around the meta themes of *Rantau* and *Rindu*.

The result of this study is also a form of ethnography as it shows the interaction of individuals and society is interdependent on the formation of knowledge. As described by Komalata & Ong (2023), people are discursive, construct knowledge every day and can express themselves linguistically sufficient to articulate their meanings. Thus, society is understood as produced and reconstructed depending on these interpretative processes (Komalata & Ong, 2023). Understanding these interpretive knowledge construction, cultural characteristics and essential facets of Penang people provides insights into the stimuli that drives their behavior, psyche, mindset and worldview.

LIMITATION OF STUDY

The respondent pool of this study is limited to those that are willing to share their life stories and are articulate in conveying their life stories in English. Many potential respondents do not wish to share their life stories despite being encouraged, coaxed and cajoled. Some respondents initially wanted to share their life stories, but subsequently backed out citing time constraints or the inability to satisfactorily put experiences into words. For those that are not proficient in English, they were offered the option of writing in a different language and subsequently have their life stories translated into English. However, none took up this offer and persisted to write in English or choose not to share their life stories altogether. Apart from language, it is also noted that the respondent pool comprises individuals whose personality predispose them to articulate and share their life stories.

CONCLUSION

Rantau and *Rindu* have emerged as meta-themes depicting the culture and social reality of Penang people. In line with the tenets of symbolic-interaction theory, these meta-themes depict the interaction among “mind, self and society” as articulated by George Herbert Mead among Penang people. This research has successfully provided a window into the lived experiences of the respondents and shed light onto their thoughts, feelings and emotions. As such, it is humbly concluded that this research has qualitatively and meaningfully contributed towards understanding the social and experiential reality of Penang people.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that future research be conducted on respondents from different parts of Malaysia. As such, a composite depiction of the social reality of all Malaysians can hopefully be obtained. Furthermore, this research can be conducted in languages other than English such as Malay, Chinese or Tamil to accommodate a wider cross-section of Malaysians. This will address the issue of skew of the respondent pool towards those who are proficient in English. Additionally, oral interviews can be considered as data gathering method to address the issue of potential respondents whose personality does not predispose them to share their life stories. Oral interviews, in languages respondents are most comfortable with, have the potential to enable them to willingly share their life stories. As such, a wider and more comprehensive cross-section of respondents can be reached enhancing the robustness and validity of the research findings.

IMPLICATION OF STUDY

This research has contributed towards the understanding of the worldviews of Penang people, Malaysians and Southeast Asians in general. A key finding are the meta themes of *Rantau* and *Rindu*, and the accompanying interlay between them that permeates the lived experiences of Penang people. Specifically, the finding of meta theme *Rantau* has expanded on the literature of *Perantau* that is customarily focused on the Minangbakau and Bugis communities. As a practice that cuts across many communities in Southeast Asia, the concept of *Rantau/Perantau* has potential to be further developed into new theorizing of an endemic social experience and reality of the Southeast Asian region.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

WTA conceptualized the research, conducted the data collection and performed the data analysis and interpretation. BMR refined the research design and enhanced the depth of the analysis.

DECLARATION OF STATEMENT

We declare that this is original research and this article has not been published elsewhere.

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STATEMENT OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There are no known conflicts of interest, and we do not receive any financial support for this research that could have influenced its outcome.

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APPENDIX 1: Table 2: Life stories and the emergent themes

Life stories	Emergent theme/s
Life story 1	Reminiscence of the past/childhood/youth/simpler times Connectivity with homes and places
Life story 2	Reminiscence of the past/childhood/youth/simpler times
Life story 3	Reminiscence of the past/childhood/youth/simpler times Appreciation/acknowledgement of family ties
Life story 4	Dreams and ambitions in life Wanderlust and wanderings outside of Penang
Life story 5	Reflections and appreciation of Penang after being away Connectivity with homes and places
Life story 6	Ruminations on Penang food and people Reminiscence of the past/childhood/youth/simpler times Reflections and appreciation of Penang after being away Appreciation of language diversity
Life story 7	Reminiscence of the past/childhood/youth Connectivity with homes and places Feeling of Penang as home and place of comfort Appreciation/acknowledgement of family ties
Life story 8	Appreciation/acknowledgement of family ties Important role of education Sense of longing, nostalgia and inward journey of reflection
Life story 9	Sense of longing, nostalgia and inward journey of reflection Important role of education
Life story 10	Ruminations on Penang food and people
Life story 11	Appreciation/acknowledgement of family ties Reminiscence of the past/childhood/youth/simpler times
Life story 12	Wanderlust and wanderings outside of Penang
Life story 13	Important role of education Ruminations on Penang food and people Reflections and appreciation of Penang after being away
Life story 14	Ruminations on Penang food and people Reflections and appreciation of Penang after being away Appreciation of language diversity
Life story 15	Ruminations on Penang food and people Connectivity with homes and places
Life story 16	Important role of education Sense of longing, nostalgia and inward journey of reflection Feeling of Penang as home and place of comfort Appreciation/acknowledgement of family ties
Life story 17	Feeling of Penang as home and place of comfort Reminiscence of the past/childhood/youth/simpler times
Life story 18	Wanderlust and wanderings outside of Penang Sense of longing, nostalgia and inward journey of reflection Appreciation/acknowledgement of family ties Dreams and ambitions in life
Life story 19	Reminiscence of the past/childhood/youth/simpler times Dreams and ambitions in life
Life story 20	Sense of longing, nostalgia and inward journey of reflection
Life story 21	Connectivity with homes and places Dreams and ambitions in life Wanderlust and wanderings outside of Penang Reflections and appreciation of Penang after being away Challenges being outside of Penang
Life story 22	Challenges being outside of Penang Wanderlust and wanderings outside of Penang
Life story 23	Challenges being outside of Penang Dreams and ambitions in life

Life story 24	Reminiscence of the past/childhood/youth/simpler times Dreams and ambitions in life Important role of education
Life story 25	Challenges being outside of Penang Ruminations on Penang food and people
Life story 26	Wanderlust and wanderings outside of Penang Challenges being outside of Penang
Life story 27	Sense of longing, nostalgia and inward journey of reflection Ruminations on Penang food and people Connectivity with homes and places
Life story 28	Sense of longing, nostalgia and inward journey of reflection Challenges being outside of Penang Connectivity with homes and places Appreciation of language diversity
Life story 29	Challenges being outside of Penang Wanderlust and wanderings outside of Penang
Life story 30	Sense of longing, nostalgia and inward journey of reflection