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FROM REVOLUTIONARY BASE TO SITE OF MEMORY: SUN YAT-SEN'S PENANG HERITAGE AND THE MAKING OF A NANYANG REVOLUTIONARY SACRED SITE

(Daripada Pangkalan Revolusi Ke Tapak Peringatan: Warisan Sun Yat-Sen Pulau Pinang Dan Pembinaan Tapak Suci Revolusi Nanyang)

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how Penang came to be remembered as a “Nanyang revolutionary sacred site” within Sun Yat-sen’s overseas revolutionary movement. Existing scholarship has largely reconstructed the factual history of overseas Chinese support for the 1911 Revolution, but less attention has been paid to the historical process through which Penang’s revolutionary role was transformed into a durable commemorative identity. Drawing on the concepts of the “invention of tradition,” *lieux de mémoire*, cultural memory, and heritage-making, the article argues that Penang’s symbolic status was produced through four interrelated processes: the relocation and reorganisation of revolutionary organisations under pressure from rival forces in Singapore; the cross-class mobilisation of Penang’s Chinese community; the post-revolutionary heritagisation of Sun Yat-sen-related sites; and the selective organisation of memory, which simplified or silenced politically complex figures and historical ambiguities. By analysing Penang

as both a revolutionary base and a constructed site of memory, the study contributes to the history of the 1911 Revolution, Malaysian historiography, overseas Chinese political mobilisation, and heritage studies concerning Chinese communities in Southeast Asia. It shows that Penang's revolutionary heritage matters not only as a record of anti-Qing activism but also as a public history resource through which Malaysian Chinese identity, local heritage interpretation, and heritage tourism continue to be negotiated within a multiethnic national landscape.

Keywords: 1911 Revolution, heritage, Penang, revolutionary memory, Sun Yat-sen.

INTRODUCTION

Penang occupies a distinctive place in the overseas history of the 1911 Revolution. It was not only one of the most important bases of Sun Yat-sen's revolutionary activities in Southeast Asia, but also a site through which the political enthusiasm, financial support, and collective memory of the Chinese community in British Malaya were channelled into the broader revolutionary movement against the Qing dynasty. The Penang Conference of November 1910, the establishment of the Penang Philomatic Union, the founding of Kwong Wah Yit Poh, and the active participation of local Chinese merchants and community leaders have long been regarded as key evidence of Penang's contribution to the revolution (Khoo, 2008; Teoh, 2004; Yen, 1976, 1982). Existing studies have made important contributions to reconstructing the factual history of overseas Chinese participation in the 1911 Revolution, especially the roles of Chinese merchants, revolutionary organisations, fundraising networks, and the revolutionary press in Singapore and Malaya (Liang, 2011; Qiu & Hu, 1992; Su, 2018; Yen, 1976, 1982). Yet Penang's commemorative identity should not be treated as a self-evident extension of historical fact. While Yen Ching-hwang's pioneering work established the basic historical framework for understanding the relationship between the overseas Chinese in Singapore and Malaya and the Chinese revolutionary movement, and Khoo's (2008) study of Sun Yat-sen in Penang provides a detailed account of local revolutionary sites, networks, and personalities; less attention has been paid to how Penang's revolutionary role was transformed into a durable commemorative identity. This article addresses that question by examining the historical construction of Penang as a "Nanyang revolutionary sacred site." It argues that Penang's symbolic status was not produced by revolutionary history alone, but emerged through a long process in which historical experience, community mobilisation, heritage-making, and selective memory interacted with one another.

Theoretically, this article draws on Hobsbawm and Ranger's (1983) concept of the "invention of tradition" and Nora's (1989, 1996) theory of *lieux de mémoire*. These perspectives help explain how selected historical fragments are repeatedly transformed into seemingly continuous traditions, and how buildings, museums, newspapers, plaques, exhibitions, and rituals become symbolic anchors of collective memory after living historical experience has receded into the past (Nora, 1989). The article also approaches Penang's Sun Yat-sen sites through an applied history lens: the question is not only whether these sites preserve an accurate revolutionary past, but also how they interpret that past for contemporary publics, local communities, museum visitors, and heritage tourists. By shifting the focus from "what Penang contributed to the revolution" to "how Penang came to be remembered as a revolutionary sacred site," this article reconsiders Penang not only as a revolutionary base, but also as a constructed memory space; highlights overseas Chinese communities as active producers of historical meaning; and clarifies how revolutionary memory has become part of Malaysian Chinese identity formation within the wider historical landscape of Malaysia.

HISTORIOGRAPHY AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The history of Sun Yat-sen's activities in Southeast Asia has long been studied through the broader framework of overseas Chinese participation in the 1911 Revolution. Existing scholarship has provided a rich factual foundation for understanding the political, financial, and organisational role of Chinese communities in Singapore and Malaya. Yen Ching-hwang's classic study remains the most important point of departure for this field, as it systematically reconstructed revolutionary organisations, fundraising patterns, political factionalism, and the role of Chinese associations and newspapers in Singapore and Malaya (Yen, 1976, 1982). Subsequent Chinese-language studies further expanded this field by examining the contribution of overseas Chinese communities to the 1911 Revolution. Liang (2011) emphasised the close relationship between the 1911 Revolution and Southeast Asia; Qiu and Hu (1992) focused on Sun Yat-sen's ties with Nanyang Chinese communities between 1900 and 1911; Su (2018) discussed the contribution of Penang Chinese to the revolution; and Chen and Peng (1996) analysed the cultural background of overseas Chinese support for Sun Yat-sen's anti-Qing movement. More specialised studies have addressed key figures and institutions in the Nanyang revolutionary network. Gao and Qin's (2005) study of Zhang Yongfu is particularly relevant because it reconstructs both his revolutionary contribution and his later ideological transformation, thereby helping to illuminate the later selectivity of commemorative narratives. In the English-language literature, Khoo Salma Nasution's *Sun Yat Sen in Penang* offers the most detailed study of Sun Yat-sen's Penang years, related revolutionary sites, local supporters, and the material history of the buildings associated with him (Khoo, 2008), while Teoh Shiaw Khuan's study of the 1910 Penang Conference further clarifies its connection with the planning of the Huanghuagang Uprising (Teoh, 2004). Together, these works provide indispensable historical detail for reconstructing Penang's revolutionary significance.

However, most existing studies remain primarily concerned with the reconstruction of revolutionary events and the assessment of overseas Chinese contributions. They have answered questions such as what role Penang Chinese played in the 1911 Revolution, how Sun Yat-sen organised revolutionary networks in Nanyang, how overseas Chinese fundraising operated, and which local leaders supported the movement. These are important questions, but they do not fully explain how Penang's revolutionary role was later transformed into a durable commemorative identity. This article therefore shifts the focus from revolutionary participation to memory construction. It does not deny Penang's historical importance to the 1911 Revolution; rather, it asks how that importance was selected, narrated, materialised, and institutionalised across time. This shift requires treating Penang's Sun Yat-sen-related sites not only as historical locations, but also as heritage spaces. The Penang Philomatic Union, the former Penang Conference site, and *Kwong Wah Yit Poh* are not merely remnants of past revolutionary activity; they are also spaces through which later generations have organised, displayed, and reinterpreted revolutionary memory.

A second body of literature is therefore necessary for this article. Heritage studies have shown that heritage is not a neutral survival of the past, but a cultural and political process through which particular histories are selected, authorised, displayed, and consumed. Smith's (2006) critique of the authorised heritage discourse is useful for understanding why certain sites, objects, and narratives acquire public authority, while Lowenthal (1998) reminds us that heritage often reshapes the past to meet present needs. Ashworth et al. (2007) further demonstrate that heritage is especially contested in multicultural societies because different communities attach different identities and claims to the same historical landscape. In memory studies, Assmann's (2011) concept of cultural memory helps explain how selected events are stabilised through texts, rituals, institutions, and material symbols. Taken together, these works make it possible to

examine Penang's Sun Yat-sen-related heritage not merely as local revolutionary history, but as a public and diasporic memory formation within Malaysian society.

To develop this argument, the article draws on three connected perspectives: Hobsbawm and Ranger's (1983) concept of the "invention of tradition," Nora's (1989, 1996) theory of *lieux de mémoire*, and cultural memory and heritage studies approaches to the public production of the past (Assmann, 2011; Smith, 2006). The first helps explain how selected revolutionary experiences are stabilised through repetition, symbolic continuity, and commemorative practice. The second clarifies the material and spatial dimensions through which buildings, museums, newspapers, plaques, exhibitions, and rituals become anchors of collective memory after living historical experience has receded into the past. The third foregrounds the fact that heritage is interpreted, curated, and used by communities in the present. Penang's Sun Yat-sen-related heritage offers a clear example of this process: the former revolutionary headquarters, the meeting site of the Penang Conference, and the newspaper founded under Sun Yat-sen's guidance have all been transformed into symbolic carriers of revolutionary memory. This article also engages with Hu Chao's study of the *Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall* in Singapore, which shows how exhibition strategies shifted from Chinese ethnic history to a broader narrative of national memory in Singapore (Hu, 2022). This comparative perspective helps illuminate the distinctiveness of Penang, where Sun Yat-sen's heritage continues to carry a strong Chinese communal dimension while also functioning within Malaysia's multiethnic public history environment. The analytical framework therefore rests on three connected propositions: Penang's status as a revolutionary centre was historically produced through strategic relocation, local elite support, and organisational adaptation; its symbolic authority was strengthened by collective mobilisation, including fundraising, journalism, public lectures, theatre, and martyr commemoration; and its later identity as a "revolutionary sacred site" was consolidated through heritage-making and selective memory.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative historical-interpretive methodology. Rather than treating Penang's Sun Yat-sen-related heritage as a fixed collection of historical facts, it examines how historical events, material sites, published narratives, museum displays, and commemorative practices together produce a public memory of revolution. The method is therefore designed to connect archival and textual evidence with field observation and heritage interpretation.

The sources used in this article fall into four categories. First, it analyses Chinese- and English-language scholarship on Sun Yat-sen's Nanyang revolutionary activities, overseas Chinese mobilisation, Malaysian Chinese history, and heritage and memory studies. Second, it uses primary materials relating to Sun Yat-sen's movements and communication, especially his letters to James and Mabel Cantlie preserved in the Wellcome Collection. Third, it examines published local histories, commemorative writings, newspaper-related accounts, and institutional materials concerning the Penang Philomatic Union, *Kwong Wah Yit Poh*, and the 1910 Penang Conference. Fourth, it draws on field observation conducted at Sun Yat-sen-related sites in Penang on 4 December 2025, including the Sun Yat Sen Museum Penang at 120 Armenian Street, the memorialised Penang Conference space, and locations associated with *Kwong Wah Yit Poh*. The field observation focused on exhibition narratives, spatial arrangement, signage, reconstructed rooms, displayed texts, visitor-oriented interpretation, and the relationship between the sites and the surrounding urban environment.

The analysis proceeded through thematic reading and triangulation. Historical materials were used to reconstruct Penang's role as an organisational base, while heritage and memory materials were read for patterns of selection, emphasis, omission, and symbolic framing. The evidence was then organised around four analytical themes: strategic relocation from Singapore to Penang, community mobilisation, heritagisation, and selective commemoration. The comparative references to Singapore, Guangzhou, and Nanjing are used not to provide a full comparative history, but to clarify the specific character of Penang's experience as a diasporic, locally managed, and Malaysian Chinese memory site.

MAKING PENANG A REVOLUTIONARY CENTRE

Penang's centrality in the history of Sun Yat-sen's Nanyang revolutionary activities has often been taken for granted. Its strategic location, commercial prosperity, dense Chinese population, and maritime connections are frequently cited as natural explanations for its rise as a revolutionary base. Yet these factors alone do not explain why Penang, rather than Singapore, eventually became the operational centre of Sun's revolutionary movement in Southeast Asia. Singapore possessed an equally important position in terms of population, wealth, transport, and political influence; Sun Yat-sen had established a branch of the Tongmenghui there as early as April 1906, and in 1908 it was elevated to the status of the Nanyang headquarters (Khoo, 2008).

From Singapore to Penang: Political Pressure and Strategic Relocation

The relocation of the Nanyang Tongmenghui headquarters from Singapore to Penang in 1910 was shaped above all by the increasingly constrained political environment in Singapore. In the early twentieth century, reformist and royalist groups associated with Kang Youwei exercised considerable influence within Singapore's Chinese community. Through newspapers and associational networks, they repeatedly challenged Sun Yat-sen's revolutionary programme and questioned his personal credibility. Allegations that Sun had misused public funds were particularly damaging because overseas revolutionary mobilisation relied heavily on trust, donations, and moral authority (Gao & Qin, 2005; Yen, 1976, 1982). At the same time, the revolutionary press in Singapore remained unstable. Newspapers associated with Zhang Yongfu and Tan Chor Lam, including *Tunan Ribao*, *Nanyang Zonghuibao*, and *Zhongxing Ribao*, faced financial difficulties, colonial pressure, and attacks from loyalist opponents (Gao & Qin, 2005; Yen, 1976, 1982). These setbacks did not make Singapore irrelevant to the revolutionary movement, but they exposed the limits of the city as a secure organisational base.

Penang, by contrast, offered a more favourable combination of political support, merchant networks, and regional connectivity. After concluding that Singapore had become a difficult base, Sun arrived in Penang on 19 July 1910 and quickly received support from local leaders such as Goh Say Eng and Ng Kim Kheng. By August 1910, the documents of the Nanyang Tongmenghui headquarters had been transferred from Singapore to Penang, showing that the relocation was institutional rather than merely personal or temporary (Khoo, 2008).

Chinese Merchant Elites and the Social Foundation of Revolutionary Organisation

Political pressure from Singapore explains why relocation became necessary, but it does not fully explain why Penang could successfully absorb and sustain the revolutionary centre. The deeper reason lies in the active support of Penang's Chinese merchant elites. Figures such as Goh Say Eng, Ng Kim Kheng, Tan Sin Cheng, and Khoo Ming Choon did far more than donate money. They offered premises, social connections, organisational leadership, and political legitimacy within the local Chinese community (Feng, 1947; Khoo, 2008).

The support of these merchant elites should not be interpreted merely as personal loyalty to Sun Yat-sen. It also reflected a broader historical psychology among overseas Chinese. Many Chinese communities in Southeast Asia felt alienated from the Qing state, which had long treated emigrants with suspicion and contempt (Chen & Peng, 1996). At the same time, Penang's Chinese society was not politically homogeneous. Some local Chinese elites maintained close ties with the Qing state, purchased official titles, or supported Qing modernisation projects (Khoo, 2008). The revolutionary leaders therefore had to compete with conservative and Qing-oriented elites for influence within the community.

The Penang Philomatic Union and Kwong Wah Yit Poh: Embedding Revolution in Legal and Cultural Spaces

One of the most important mechanisms through which the revolutionary organisation rooted itself in Penang was the creation of legal and cultural institutions. The Penang Philomatic Union was central to this process. Established in 1908, it functioned outwardly as a reading room and cultural association, but in practice it also served as a site of revolutionary communication, education, fundraising, and organisation. Its constitution was reportedly drafted with the assistance of Wang Jingwei, who stayed in Penang for several days at the request of local revolutionaries (Khoo, 2008).

The founding of *Kwong Wah Yit Poh* in December 1910 further embedded revolutionary discourse in Penang's public sphere. Founded under Sun Yat-sen's guidance at 120 Armenian Street, the newspaper became one of the most important Chinese-language revolutionary papers in Southeast Asia. Its title encoded the revolutionary objective within the newspaper's name. Unlike secret meetings or private correspondence, a daily newspaper allowed revolutionary ideas to enter everyday reading practices (Khoo, 2008).

Secrecy, Communication, and the Wellcome Collection Letters

While institutions such as the Penang Philomatic Union and *Kwong Wah Yit Poh* gave the movement a public face, revolutionary activities in Penang also depended on secrecy and coded communication. The letters from Sun Yat-sen to James and Mabel Cantlie preserved in the Wellcome Collection offer valuable evidence of this hidden dimension. Two letters written from Penang around the time of the Penang Conference are especially important because they show how carefully Sun managed information even when communicating with trusted friends (Sun, 1910a, 1910b).

In his letter of 20 November 1910, written only about a week after the Penang Conference, Sun referred to personal and family matters but did not disclose the content of the recent revolutionary meeting. Four days later, on 24 November 1910, he wrote again to Mrs Cantlie and asked her to keep his arrival in Britain hidden from the Chinese Legation, indicating that anyone who came to her house using the name "Chungsan" should be treated as a friend (Sun, 1910a, 1910b). These letters confirm that Penang was connected to a broader transnational revolutionary route linking Southeast Asia, Hong Kong, Britain, and North America.

Penang as a Deliberately Constructed Revolutionary Base

Taken together, these factors show that Penang's rise as a revolutionary centre was neither accidental nor natural. It resulted from the interaction of external pressure, local opportunity, organisational strategy, and community support. The loyalist challenge in Singapore pushed Sun and his followers to seek a more reliable base; Penang's merchant elites offered the necessary social and financial foundation; and local institutions allowed revolutionary politics to be embedded in legal and cultural spaces and public media (Khoo, 2008; Yen, 1976, 1982).

COMMUNITY MOBILISATION AND REVOLUTIONARY LEGITIMACY

If the relocation of the revolutionary centre explains how Penang became an organisational base, community mobilisation explains how it acquired moral legitimacy. Penang's importance to Sun Yat-sen's movement did not rest solely on the presence of revolutionary leaders or institutions. It also depended on the willingness of local Chinese society to participate in the revolutionary cause through meetings, newspapers, donations, public performances, and martyr commemoration (Khoo, 2008; Su, 2018; Yen, 1976, 1982).

The Penang Conference and the Politics of Decision-Making

The Penang Conference of 13 November 1910 occupies a central place in the memory of Penang's revolutionary history. Held at Sun Yat-sen's residence on Dato Kramat Road, the meeting brought together Sun, Huang Xing, Hu Hanmin, Zhao Sheng, Sun Mei, and key representatives of the Nanyang Tongmenghui branches, including leaders from Penang, Seremban, Ipoh, and Pontianak (Teoh, 2004; Yen, 1982). The meeting was not a large public gathering. It was a secret strategic conference attended by a small circle of trusted revolutionaries.

The conference confirmed Guangzhou as the target of the next uprising and discussed the organisation of a death-defying vanguard. It also set a fundraising target of 130,000 Straits dollars, to be collected across British and Dutch colonial territories, Siam, and Annam. To avoid interference from colonial authorities, the funds were to be raised under the name of "Chinese educational donations" (Yen, 1982). This detail shows that the Penang Conference was not merely a passionate patriotic meeting. It was also a moment of political calculation.

The day after the conference, Sun addressed a broader meeting at the Penang Philomatic Union on Armenian Street. According to Yang Hanxiang's account (as cited in Khoo, 2008), Sun placed money and life within the same moral economy of revolution: overseas Chinese who could not fight directly were asked to contribute through donations, while revolutionaries in China would contribute through bodily sacrifice. The immediate amount raised was 8,000 Straits dollars, but Yen's estimate that the total funds for the Huanghuagang Uprising reached 187,636 Straits dollars, with Singapore and Malaya contributing 47,663, suggests that Penang's later symbolic status cannot be explained by financial scale alone (Yen, 1982).

Kwong Wah Yit Poh and the Everyday Circulation of Revolutionary Discourse

The Penang Conference represented elite decision-making, but revolutionary mobilisation also required regular communication with the wider Chinese community. This was the function of *Kwong Wah Yit Poh*. Founded on 2 December 1910 under Sun Yat-sen's guidance, the newspaper became one of the most important vehicles for revolutionary discourse in Penang (Khoo, 2008). It allowed political ideas that had once circulated through secret meetings and private networks to enter the public sphere of daily reading. The importance of the newspaper lay in its capacity to normalise revolutionary language. Through regular publication, the revolution became part of everyday discussion rather than an occasional topic of elite conspiracy. The newspaper also provided a platform through which the revolutionary movement could defend itself against loyalist criticism and colonial scepticism. In a media environment where Sun and his

followers were often attacked by conservative Chinese papers and English-language commentary, *Kwong Wah Yit Poh* became a counter-public sphere for revolutionary legitimacy (Khoo, 2008).

Fundraising and Cross-Class Participation

The most visible expression of Penang's revolutionary mobilisation was fundraising, but its social significance lay in the fact that fundraising crossed class, gender, and occupational boundaries. Leading merchants such as Goh Say Eng and Ng Kim Kheng contributed substantial sums and provided organisational support; members of the Penang Philomatic Union helped support Sun Yat-sen's family; women donated jewellery; and elderly women reportedly offered savings accumulated through embroidery work (Feng, 1947; Khoo, 2008; Su, 2018). Such stories later became important to revolutionary memory because they suggested that the movement was not limited to wealthy merchants or educated activists.

Theatre was another important form of grassroots mobilisation. Inspired by revolutionary drama troupes from Hong Kong, local groups in Penang used public performances to spread revolutionary ideas and raise funds. Performances held in the name of charity were less likely to be obstructed by the authorities and could reach audiences beyond urban elite circles, including workers and residents in rural plantations (Khoo, 2008). Theatre therefore translated revolutionary politics into a popular cultural form.

Martyrdom and the Moralisation of Revolutionary Memory

The final and most powerful element in the construction of revolutionary legitimacy was martyrdom. The Huanghuagang Uprising of April 1911 failed militarily, but it became one of the most important moral events in the history of the revolution. Many of the martyrs were overseas Chinese, including men connected with Southeast Asia (Liang, 2011). For Penang, figures such as Luo Zhonghuo, Zhou Hua, Chen Wenbao, and Li Yunnan connected the local Nanyang world to the battlefield of the anti-Qing revolution (Khoo, 2008).

From Mobilisation to Memory

The different forms of Penang Chinese participation—decision-making, newspapers, fundraising, theatre, and martyrdom—formed a cumulative process through which revolutionary legitimacy was produced. Political decision-making gave Penang strategic importance. The revolutionary press gave the movement public visibility. Fundraising transformed support into social participation. Martyrdom elevated that participation into moral memory (Khoo, 2008; Yen, 1982). Through this narrative, Penang was remembered not merely as a place where revolutionary activities occurred, but as a community that had assumed historical responsibility for China's transformation.

FROM REVOLUTIONARY BASE TO SITE OF MEMORY

The historical significance of Penang did not end with the 1911 Revolution. After the revolutionary movement achieved its political objective, the spaces associated with Sun Yat-sen in Penang gradually acquired new meanings. Buildings that had once served practical functions—as residences, meeting rooms, reading rooms, newspaper offices, and organisational centres—were later reinterpreted as heritage sites. This transformation from revolutionary base to site of memory is central to understanding how Penang came to be remembered as a “Nanyang revolutionary sacred site” (Khoo, 2008; Nora, 1989).

120 Armenian Street: From Urban Building to Heritage Space

120 Armenian Street is significant not simply because of its association with Sun Yat-sen, but because its meanings have been repeatedly reconfigured across commercial, revolutionary, and heritage contexts. Before its later memorialisation, the building formed part of the urban fabric of Armenian Street and was

embedded in local Chinese commercial and associational networks. Its use by the Penang Philomatic Union from 1909, and the subsequent establishment of *Kwong Wah Yit Poh* there in December 1910, temporarily transformed the premises into a site of political communication, print circulation, and revolutionary organisation (Khoo, 2008). In this sense, the building's historical importance lies less in its architectural singularity than in its role as an infrastructural node within a broader revolutionary network.

The building's later emergence as a heritage site was neither automatic nor inevitable. After the revolutionary period, it passed through changing patterns of ownership and use, and its survival depended largely on local intervention rather than state-led preservation. The purchase and restoration of the building by Khoo Salma Nasution's family in the 1990s prevented its loss to redevelopment and marked a decisive shift in its status: by the time restoration was completed in 1994, 120 Armenian Street had begun to move from being an ordinary historic shophouse to a consciously preserved site of revolutionary memory (Khoo, 2008). This transformation was further consolidated by the 2001 exhibition "*Sun Yat Sen in Penang*," curated by Khoo Salma Nasution, Lim Gaik Siang, and Goh Mai Loon, which assembled local research, archival materials, and visual evidence to frame the building as a public memory space. Its opening by Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad gave the site national visibility, while Hu Jintao's visit to Penang in 2002 further connected local commemoration to official transnational recognition (Khoo, 2008; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2002). The site's mnemonic function is also produced through its material layering: the coexistence of the older shop sign "Chng Eng Joo" with the contemporary sign of the Sun Yat Sen Museum Penang makes visible the building's accumulated identities as commercial premises, residential space, revolutionary meeting point, and heritage museum (X. Hou, field notes, 4 December 2025). The building therefore operates as a palimpsest, in which present heritage meaning depends on, rather than replaces, the traces of earlier urban and social functions.

Museum Exhibition and the Narrative of Overseas Chinese Patriotism

The museum exhibition at the former Penang Philomatic Union site does not simply preserve objects. It organises them into a narrative. The core storyline links Sun Yat-sen, the 1911 Revolution, the Nanyang Chinese community, the Penang Conference, *Kwong Wah Yit Poh*, overseas Chinese support for China, and later wartime contributions (X. Hou, field notes, 4 December 2025). In this structure, Penang Chinese history is presented as an integral part of modern Chinese national history. This narrative may be described as a form of "overseas Chinese patriotism." It does not treat the Chinese community in Penang as a marginal or external observer of China's revolution. Instead, it places the community at the centre of historical action. The exhibition suggests that overseas Chinese were not merely donors, readers, or sympathisers; they were active participants in the making of modern China. This mode of narration resembles broader patterns in overseas Chinese historical commemoration, while retaining Penang's own communal emphasis (Hu, 2022). At the same time, the exhibition's structure also reveals the selectivity of memory. The timeline moves smoothly from the 1911 Revolution to later anti-Japanese resistance and cultural inheritance. This creates a morally coherent arc from revolution to patriotism to heritage transmission. Yet the history of Penang Chinese society after 1949, including the more complex political circumstances of postcolonial Malaysia, ethnic politics, leftist movements, Chinese education, and identity negotiation, is much less visible. The result is a commemorative narrative that is powerful precisely because it is selective.

The Penang Conference Site and the Dramatisation of Historical Turning Points

The former Penang Conference site provides another example of how revolutionary history is transformed into commemorative space. The historical meeting of 13 November 1910 was small, secret, and uncertain in outcome. Yet in contemporary heritage narration, the meeting is often presented as a decisive turning

point leading directly to the Huanghuagang Uprising and, ultimately, to the 1911 Revolution (Teoh, 2004; Yen, 1982).

This transformation depends heavily on spatial and emotional dramatisation. The reconstruction of the meeting room, the display of participant lists, the explanation of fundraising targets, and the repeated emphasis on Sun Yat-sen's emotional speech create an immersive historical scene (X. Hou, field notes, 4 December 2025). Visitors are encouraged to imagine themselves witnessing a critical moment in revolutionary history. The meeting is no longer experienced as an uncertain strategic discussion; it becomes a dramatic moment of destiny.

Kwong Wah Yit Poh and the Media Extension of Memory

Unlike a building or a museum, *Kwong Wah Yit Poh* represents a living form of revolutionary heritage. Founded in 1910 under Sun Yat-sen's guidance, it is not only a historical newspaper but also an institution that has continued to exist across changing political environments (Khoo, 2008; Zhang & Zhao, 2016). Its survival allows revolutionary memory to move beyond the fixed space of a museum and circulate through print, digital media, public commemorations, and community events.

Heritagisation and the Applied History of Penang's Revolutionary Memory

Penang's revolutionary heritage is both preservative and productive. It preserves sites associated with Sun Yat-sen, but it also produces Penang as a "revolutionary sacred site." This production occurs through repeated acts of naming, displaying, visiting, filming, guiding, photographing, publishing, and commemorating. From the perspective of applied history, these practices translate specialist historical knowledge into public narratives that can be encountered in museums, guided tours, newspapers, commemorative ceremonies, and heritage tourism. The site becomes sacred not because it is untouched by history, but because it is continually reactivated as meaningful (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983; Nora, 1989). This applied history function is especially important in Penang because Sun Yat-sen's heritage is embedded in a living urban environment rather than isolated in a state-managed monumental complex. Museum interpretation, restored shophouse architecture, street-level signage, public anniversaries, and tourism-oriented storytelling together make revolutionary memory available to different audiences: local Chinese associations, Malaysian visitors, international tourists, school groups, and researchers. The heritage value of the site therefore lies not only in preserving the material remains of the revolutionary period, but also in providing a public language through which questions of migration, patriotism, community contribution, and multicultural belonging can be discussed.

A brief comparison clarifies Penang's distinctiveness. The *Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall* in Singapore has been incorporated into a state-managed museum environment in which Chinese revolutionary history is interpreted alongside Singapore's national narrative (Hu, 2022). Memorial sites in Guangzhou and Nanjing, by contrast, are located within the territorial history of China and are more directly tied to narratives of national revolution, republican state-building, and anti-imperial sacrifice. Penang differs from both models. It is neither simply a national revolutionary shrine within China nor a fully state-centred national museum. Its authority rests on the overlap between local community preservation, diasporic revolutionary memory, urban heritage, and Malaysian Chinese identity. This combination explains why Penang can be remembered as a Nanyang revolutionary sacred site even though its sacredness was produced outside the territorial centre of the 1911 Revolution.

SELECTIVE MEMORY AND THE POLITICS OF COMMEMORATION

The transformation of Penang's Sun Yat-sen-related sites into heritage spaces necessarily involved selection. Commemoration is never a complete reproduction of the past. It decides which events should be highlighted, which figures should be celebrated, which episodes should be simplified, and which historical complications should be muted. This selectivity is not a marginal weakness of heritage narration. It is one of the central mechanisms through which a usable public memory is produced (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983; Nora, 1989).

In Penang's case, the commemorative narrative presents the city as a site of revolutionary loyalty, patriotic sacrifice, and overseas Chinese contribution to the making of modern China. This narrative is historically grounded, but it is also carefully organised. It foregrounds the revolutionary period between 1908 and 1911, highlights the Penang Conference, the founding of *Kwong Wah Yit Poh*, the support of local Chinese merchants, and the sacrifice of overseas Chinese revolutionaries (Khoo, 2008; Su, 2018; Yen, 1982). At the same time, it compresses or avoids later historical developments that might disturb the moral clarity of this story.

Freezing Historical Figures at Their Revolutionary Moment

One important feature of commemorative selectivity is the tendency to freeze historical figures at the moment of their revolutionary contribution. Individuals whose later careers became politically complicated are often remembered primarily through their earlier association with Sun Yat-sen and the anti-Qing movement. This is especially evident in the cases of Zhang Yongfu and Wang Jingwei (Gao & Qin, 2005; Khoo, 2008).

Zhang Yongfu

Zhang Yongfu was one of Sun Yat-sen's most important collaborators in Singapore and played a crucial role in the revolutionary press. As a key figure behind *Zhongxing Ribao*, he contributed to the formation of a revolutionary public sphere in Nanyang. His early revolutionary activities have been well documented by Gao and Qin (2005), who also analysed his later ideological transformation. Yet public commemorative narratives tend to emphasise his early revolutionary role while leaving his later political trajectory much less visible.

Wang Jingwei, Chen Bijun, and the Silence of Later History

The case of Wang Jingwei presents an even stronger example of selective memory. Wang was closely connected with the revolutionary movement in Nanyang. He assisted in drafting the constitution of the Penang Philomatic Union and was one of Sun Yat-sen's trusted revolutionary associates during the anti-Qing period (Khoo, 2008). Yet Wang's later career as head of the collaborationist regime in Nanjing during the Japanese occupation makes him a deeply problematic figure in modern Chinese historical memory. As a result, his early revolutionary role can be acknowledged only in limited and controlled ways.

Chen Bijun adds another layer to this problem. Born in Penang, she could have served as a local point of connection between Penang Chinese society and the broader revolutionary movement. Yet her association with Wang Jingwei's later political career makes her difficult to incorporate into a positive narrative of Penang's revolutionary pride. Her origin in Penang is therefore not strongly mobilised as a commemorative resource.

The Moral Economy of Revolutionary Commemoration

These examples suggest that Penang's revolutionary memory operates within a particular moral economy. The commemorative narrative values loyalty, sacrifice, patriotism, and contribution to national salvation. Historical figures are included most fully when they embody these values without contradiction. When their biographies introduce later ambiguity, the narrative either simplifies them, limits their visibility, or omits the troubling parts. This moral economy is not unique to Penang, but Penang's diasporic and minority context gives it particular social significance (Hu, 2022).

Selective Memory and Malaysian Chinese Identity

The politics of commemoration in Penang must also be understood within the broader context of Malaysian historiography and Malaysian Chinese identity. Malaysian national history has often been organised around questions of colonial rule, nationalism, ethnicity, citizenship, and the making of a multiethnic nation-state. Within this landscape, Sun Yat-sen heritage occupies an unusual position. It is rooted in a Chinese revolutionary movement, but it is preserved, interpreted, and visited in Malaysia; it refers to modern Chinese national history, but its material survival depends on Penang's local urban heritage and Malaysian Chinese community institutions. For Malaysian Chinese communities, the memory of participation in the 1911 Revolution offers an important symbolic resource. It demonstrates that overseas Chinese were not peripheral to modern Chinese history; they were active contributors to one of its defining transformations (Liang, 2011; Su, 2018; Yen, 1976, 1982).

For this reason, the "Nanyang revolutionary sacred site" narrative is not simply about the past. It is also about contemporary needs for communal self-understanding in a plural society. Public statements by leaders associated with the Penang Philomatic Union have described the institution as a transmitter of Chinese culture and a witness to national rejuvenation, revealing how the memory of the revolution is mobilised in the present to sustain a sense of cultural mission and historical continuity (Chen, 2025). At the same time, the Penang case shows that Malaysian Chinese identity is not produced only through local communal history or national political belonging, but also through transnational memories that connect Penang to China, Southeast Asia, and the wider Chinese diaspora.

Remembering, Forgetting, and the Construction of Sacredness

A "sacred site" is produced not only by remembering, but also by forgetting. To make Penang into a revolutionary sacred site, commemorative narratives must concentrate attention on certain morally charged events and figures. They must also keep other histories at the margins. This dynamic of remembering and forgetting is central to the construction of sacredness. The commemorative narrative resolves historical complexity by transforming it into symbolic clarity through selective display, emotional emphasis, narrative compression, and silence (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983; Nora, 1989).

The Analytical Value of Selectivity

Recognising the selectivity of Penang's commemorative narrative does not diminish its historical value. On the contrary, it allows us to understand more precisely how public memory works. A purely factual history of Sun Yat-sen in Penang can explain the events of 1908–1911. But an analysis of selective memory explains why those events still matter, how they are made meaningful, and why certain versions of the past become socially durable.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the making of Penang as a “Nanyang revolutionary sacred site” by shifting attention from revolutionary participation to memory construction. Penang’s importance to Sun Yat-sen’s movement has long been recognised in the historiography of the 1911 Revolution and overseas Chinese political mobilisation (Khoo, 2008; Teoh, 2004; Yen, 1976, 1982). Yet its later status as a sacred site of revolutionary memory cannot be explained simply by the fact that revolutionary activities took place there. Rather, this status was produced through a historical process in which political strategy, community mobilisation, heritage-making, and selective remembrance interacted with one another. Penang first became significant because it was deliberately made into a revolutionary base under specific political conditions: loyalist and reformist pressure in Singapore encouraged the relocation of the Nanyang revolutionary headquarters, while Penang Chinese merchant elites, the Penang Philomatic Union, and *Kwong Wah Yit Poh* provided the organisational, social, and media infrastructure through which revolutionary activities could be embedded in local Chinese society (Khoo, 2008; Yen, 1976, 1982). At the same time, Sun Yat-sen’s correspondence preserved in the Wellcome Collection reveals that this public revolutionary world was underpinned by secrecy, surveillance, and coded communication (Sun, 1910a, 1910b). The symbolic authority of Penang was further strengthened by the transformation of revolutionary support into collective moral legitimacy. Through the Penang Conference, local fundraising, revolutionary journalism, theatre performances, public lectures, and martyr commemoration, Penang’s Chinese community came to occupy a meaningful place in the moral economy of the 1911 Revolution (Khoo, 2008; Su, 2018; Yen, 1982). Its contribution was not limited to financial assistance; donations, newspaper shares, women’s jewellery, small savings, association networks, and the sacrifice of overseas Chinese martyrs were woven into a larger narrative of communal participation. After the revolution, this history was gradually reinterpreted through restoration, exhibition, public ceremony, media circulation, and heritage tourism. Buildings such as 120 Armenian Street, the former Penang Conference site, and the institutional legacy of *Kwong Wah Yit Poh* became, in Nora’s (1989) terms, *lieux de mémoire*: places where collective memory was anchored, organised, and transmitted after the original revolutionary environment had disappeared.

This process of commemoration, however, also depended on selectivity. The public memory of Penang’s revolutionary past foregrounds loyalty, sacrifice, patriotism, and overseas Chinese contribution, while simplifying or silencing historical complexities that might weaken this moral clarity. Figures such as Zhang Yongfu, Wang Jingwei, and Chen Bijun demonstrate how commemorative narratives often freeze historical actors at their revolutionary moment while avoiding later political ambiguities (Gao & Qin, 2005; Khoo, 2008). Such selectivity should not be understood simply as distortion, but as a constitutive feature of public memory. A “sacred site” is produced not only by remembering certain events, but also by organising, compressing, and sometimes forgetting others. The case of Penang therefore shows how revolutionary history becomes usable memory: historical experience is transformed into a morally coherent and socially meaningful narrative through repeated acts of preservation, display, narration, and omission. By analysing Penang as both a revolutionary base and a constructed site of memory, this article contributes to the history of the 1911 Revolution, overseas Chinese studies, and the applied historical study of heritage and identity. It shows that overseas revolutionary sites should be studied not only as operational nodes in anti-Qing networks, but also as later memory spaces through which communities produce historical meaning. Penang’s revolutionary significance is therefore twofold: before 1911, it was a place where revolutionary strategy, organisation, fundraising, and communication were carried out; after 1911, it became a place where those activities were remembered, displayed, simplified, and invested with symbolic value. Its sacredness was not simply inherited from the revolution. It was made through the continuing interaction of history, memory, and heritage.

The implications of this case extend beyond Sun Yat-sen studies. For Malaysian historiography, Penang's revolutionary heritage shows how local Chinese history can be connected to wider regional and transnational processes without being detached from Malaysia's own multiethnic historical landscape. For heritage management, the case suggests that preservation should attend not only to buildings and artefacts, but also to interpretation, narrative balance, visitor education, and the careful handling of politically complex memories. For public history and heritage tourism, Penang demonstrates how a small set of urban sites can become a platform for explaining diaspora, political mobilisation, community identity, and the selective nature of memory. The value of Penang's Sun Yat-sen-related heritage therefore lies not only in commemorating a revolutionary past, but also in making that past available for contemporary reflection on identity, belonging, and historical responsibility in Malaysia.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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