

HOME > CULTURE > MARRIED TO THE COAST

MARRIED TO THE COAST

[PREV](#) [NEXT](#)

19 May 2016

 +1

Like her name, Rohani Longuet's relationship with Terengganu is a spiritual one that has transcended four decades. Read on for her story.

"When I first came to Terengganu, I saw this island that seemed like emerald, surrounded by precious blue waters of the austerity. Between the island and the riverbank, there was a fleet of 15 boats. The people were coming out from the deck with sacks of salt, wearing their triangular hats."



At 73, Christine Rohani Longuet has resided in Pulau Duyong for over 40 years with her husband, Wan Osman Wan Abdullah. From introduction, her enthusiasm spills over into a range of subjects from boat building to the fishing island's sociology. She has a black notebook propped on her lap, taking notes of the conversation; gleaning for new ideas. Professionally, she is an ethno-botanist and is currently pursuing a PhD. She occasionally switches between English and perfect spoken Malay, a habit she's developed. As the afternoon waned on, she recounts her past – beginning from when she arrived Malaysia in 1971.

From young, and like many, she dreamed of travelling the world. After separating from her first husband, she left France with her children. It had been a long-time desire of hers to build a boat to explore the world with her friends and children. And after many weeks in Kuala Lumpur, she learned that up in the East Coast, Pulau Duyong was one of the last few places that still had an active traditional boat-building industry.

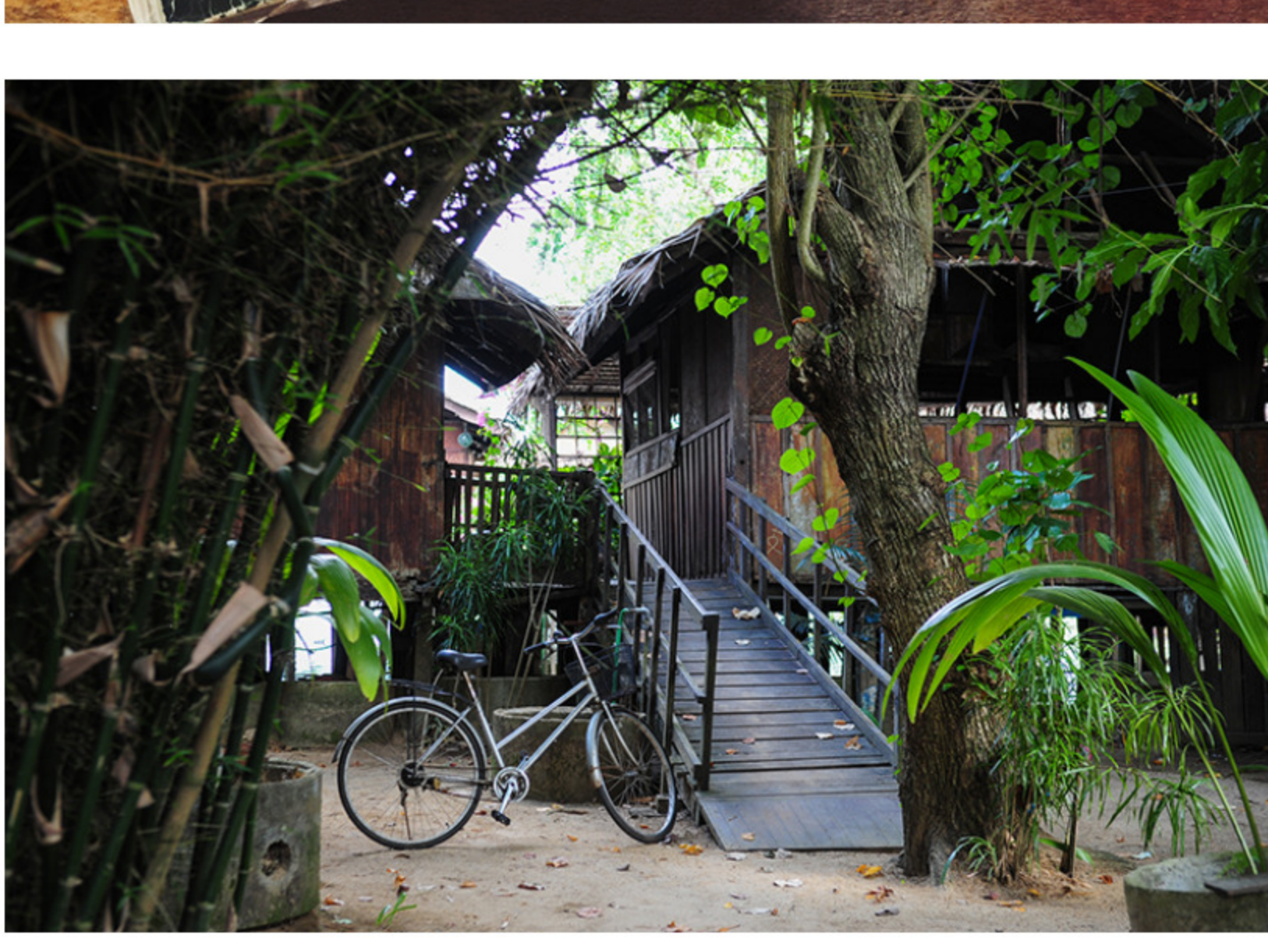
Her journey took her up to the fishing island, where she commissioned the building of two boats. It was here she encountered her future husband, Wan Osman, who she vividly remembers pulling at fishing nets. He had just returned from Kuala Lumpur and started working with his father on the family fishing boat. Four years later, the two would marry, after he helped her bring back her four children from Southern Thailand, as she returned from her travels in Saigon and witnessed the tail end of the Vietnam War.

Naturally, their marriage was initially not well received. "Even in France, a promising guy marrying an older lady, having already four children is not something welcomed by any future mother-in-law." In fact, in the first few weeks, family members visited the mother-in-law to commiserate, as she fell ill. Rohani Longuet however, believes that her late mother-in-law accepted her. The two shared a good relationship within the private confines of their family, the mother-in-law often only consulting her for medical advice in the later years of her life.



When it came to her husband, Wan Osman commands natural authority, something his wife says he inherited from his Nahkoda lineage, being seafarers in the old days. He was the son of the local *imam*, and was 19 years old when he proposed marriage. But for one so serious, he was also quick to laugh and joked often about current politics and the changing tides of Malaysian society. He was as she described him: dark, possessed the long face with thick eyebrows, common with seafarers. Positioned between his intelligent eyes was a long nose, supported by a half-smile.

Upon her return from Saigon and entering the marriage, Rohani Longuet got into the boat business. After 40 years of residence, she knows the island and its trade like the back of her hand, acting as an unofficial curator and guide to those who visit the island to learn more about boat-building. She would occasionally refer to *Sukma Angin*, a novel by Malaysian laureate Arena Wati. Having personally translated the book, she describes it as a perfect tome to understanding Malay society through the generational story of seafarers and their relationship to their ships.



Drawn by the appeal of Pulau Duyong, Rohani Longuet and Wan Osman built Awi's Yellow House, a riverside chalet for experience-hungry travellers. Over the decades, the chalet had become a cultural center as well as a lodging for those seeking to learn the island's dying boat-building trade. The couple do not live there, but in the walls of their home, there is an adornment of photographs with famous figures like A. Samad Said and the production team of the award-winning film, *Merong Mahawangsa*. In fact, she was consulted for the construction of the boats that appeared in the film.

Having stayed in Pulau Duyong for over four decades, Rohani Longuet says with a smile, "I did not adapt, they adapted to me." Her daughter explained how the people of Pulau Duyong respected, and in turn, understood her – for her contributions to the community. It was common for her children to return home from school, to find their mother hosting guests, ranging from students to history enthusiasts, all eager for Rohani Longuet to share her knowledge.

"I bring to the foreigners, Pulau Duyong. It doesn't show that I'm from Pulau Duyong but I have loved it enough to bring love to other people. That's why I can stay there, because there is a path that has been woven," she muses when reflecting on how she had assimilated into a community so different from her own upbringing.

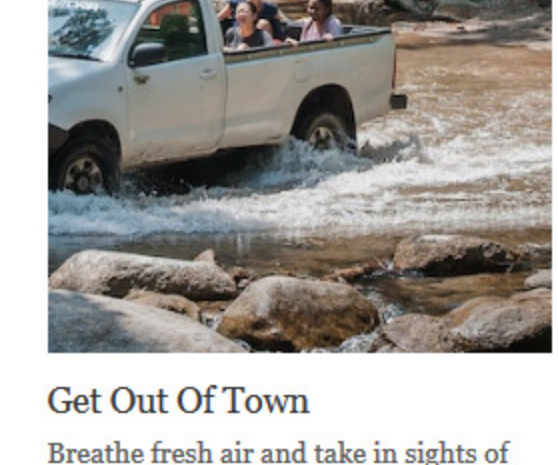


Years into her marriage, she gave birth to four more children. None of them stay in Terengganu, either working in Kuala Lumpur or having returned to Paris, France. She occasionally comes down to Kuala Lumpur to visit her children and laughs joyfully on the possibility of being a great-grandmother by next year. There is a family portrait that hangs in the dining room, one that she pauses over thoughtfully as she narrates the achievements of her eight children and their spouses.

The *azan* resounds throughout the island and Wan Osman appears shortly after, dressed in *kain pelikat*, a green shirt and a *kopiah* covering his straight dark hair. He is about to leave for the evening prayers and walks down the house steps, passing by the row of colourful boats laid out in the garden. As he closes the wooden gate behind him, Rohani Longuet looks on at her husband, then back to her cursive notes—adding something new to her lifelong chapters of experiences.

By Aziff Azuddin
Photos by Aziff Azuddin

RECENT ARTICLES



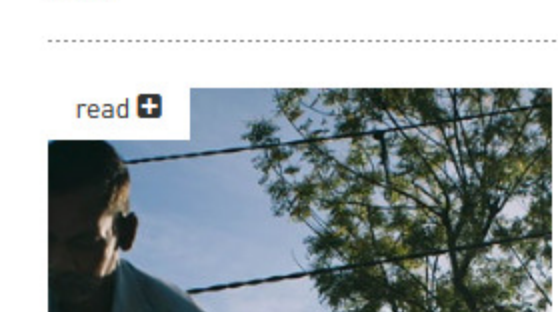
Get Out Of Town

Breathe fresh air and take in sights of lush greenery with a visit to some of Malaysia's best nature getaway spots...



Get Out To Kuala Kurau

For a break from the city, head out to Kuala Kurau in Perak, just a three and a half hour journey from KL. Named after the ...



The Washermen Of Dhobi Ghaut

Generations of men at Taman Dhobi Ghaut in Penang have been washing laundry even before Malaysia's...



Making Mantin

In 2014, Kampung Hakka, Mantin, found itself in a tussle with private developers. While many of its residents have left town, the remain...



Scenes From The Taiping Market

At over 100 years old, the wet market in Taiping, Perak is the oldest of its kind in Malaysia. The historic to...



In Search Of A Sustainable Way Forward

From making Kuala Lumpur's first bicycle map to kayaking down the Klang River, there's a lot that



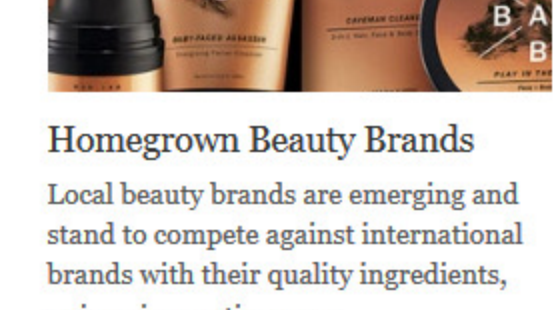
Homegrown Beauty Brands

Local beauty brands are emerging and stand to compete against international brands with their quality ingredients, unique innovation an...



Formula One In Malaysia: Memorable Moments

Malaysia has hosted the Formula One World Championship since 1999, but this weekend marks the final race at Sepang. It's...



The Roti Bakar Express

When in Kluang, it's a must to stop at its train station to toast to the originals who made the humble breakfast of roti bakar an...



Just Keep Spinning

Melaka-based gasing master Remy Azizi Abdul Karim – otherwise known as Panglima Kayu Pusing – is going all out to ensure th...

[ALL ALONG THE COASTLINE](#)
[THE RISE OF INDIE IN SABAH](#)

+1



Chinese Calligraphy In Malaysia

MON, 02 JUL 2018
Nai Chung Hak has devoted over 50 years in pursuing his passion for calligraphy, a technically demanding practice of handwriting tha...



Wood And Stilts: The Traditional Malay House

WED, 13 JUN 2018
We look at the architectural elements and changes of three different rumah Melayu houses in Kampung Baru. Though difficult to find...



Exploring Pengkalan Hulu

WED, 20 JUN 2018
Far in the north corner of Perak lies Pengkalan Hulu, a place where older Chinese, Malay and Indian folk may still turn around and sp...



Wats In Tumput

MON, 26 FEB 2018
We take a look at the Buddhist temples that dot the town of Tumput, Kelantan on the Thailand-Malaysia border. Situated on the nor...



Welcome to Malaysia. There's so much more to Malaysia than meets the eye. Join us in exploring the warmth of its people, the beauty of its nature, the wealth of its cultures and the abundance of joy in everything you discover.

Privacy Policy
Terms & Conditions
Disclaimer