

## INTERVIEW SERIES WITH REPRESENTATIVES OF JAPAN-RELATED ORGANIZATIONS (No. 6)

### CHOO SHING LAI

#### Malaysian-Japanese Society (MJS)

##### Self-introduction

My name is Choo Shing Lai, and I have had the honor of serving as the President of the Malaysian-Japanese Society (MJS) since 2015. I was born in Butterworth and grew up in Penaga, a place I proudly call my hometown. My academic journey began at Chung Ling High School, and in 1988, I embarked on a significant chapter of my life by pursuing higher education at Meiji University in Tokyo, Japan. This

experience marked the beginning of my enduring and meaningful connection with Japan, shaping both my personal and professional life.

##### Introduction of your organization

MJS essentially acts as a bridge between Penang, Malaysia, and Japan in various fields such as cultural exchange and education, although education is not our main focus. However, when people inquire about education, we assist and guide them, even though we do not play a role similar to JAGAM (Japan Graduates' Association of Malaysia), which primarily focuses on education. I was the president of JAGAM from 2011 to 2015, so I have experience regarding educational matters and try to share this knowledge with MJS members to help students pursue studies in Japan.

The Malaysian-Japanese Society (MJS) was established in 1967, almost 57 years ago, by a group of business leaders. Looking back, when Japanese companies first came to invest in Malaysia, they encountered many challenges, particularly in language, culture, and history. MJS was formed to address these problems and promote harmony.





In the 1960s, Penang did not have a Consulate-General's office, nor were there other Japanese-related organizations like the Japanese School, PJA (Penang Japanese Association), or JACTIM (The Japanese Chamber of Trade & Industry, Malaysia). MJS was the first Japanese-related organization in Penang, aiming to promote Japanese culture and foster friendship between Malaysia and Japan. Our founder, Dato' Khoo Leong Hun, played a crucial role in establishing MJS in collaboration with companies like TORAY and others.



### What is your relationship with Japan?

MJS's relationship with Japan involves fostering mutual understanding between Malaysia and Japan in areas such as culture and business, and addressing any issues that may arise. We strive to maintain a strong relationship with Japan, further deepening the ties between the two countries. MJS makes efforts to promote mutual understanding, allowing Japanese and Malaysians interested in these interactions to join the society. In the past, there was no place for Malaysians and Japanese to gather. That's why, after MJS was formed in 1967, we organized many gatherings. Japanese residents in Penang who struggled to connect with locals would attend these gatherings.

### How is your involvement in Japanese related activities?

We serve as a platform for people with the shared goal of strengthening the bridge between Penang, Malaysia, and Japan, promoting mutual understanding through various activities. This is the core value of MJS, and we continue to uphold it through our activities. We need more people, particularly from the younger generation, to bring fresh ideas since they come from diverse backgrounds and have different needs. Although ideas change over time, our core values and objectives remain the same. With more people involved, we can generate a variety of ideas. As President, I am eager to welcome more people, especially young individuals, to join MJS. If they have ideas, we are open to them and are always looking for new contributions from the younger generation or anyone interested in strengthening ties between our two countries.



### What is the most interesting element about Japan?

In my opinion, having studied in Japan, I believe discipline is a remarkable quality of the Japanese people. Discipline encompasses many aspects,



including punctuality. When you are disciplined, you tend to complete tasks early and on time.

The second important element is “manners.” Having good manners is essential when interacting with others, as it helps build strong relationships. If you do not greet people or engage with them, your relationships may suffer. This is something we can learn from Japan.

Another valuable lesson from Japan’s core values is “not troubling others.” If something doesn’t feel right, don’t impose it on others. This is an important principle for human beings. If everyone followed these principles, the world would be more peaceful. Good relationships are built without conflict, and this fosters harmony, which is evident in Japan. Given Malaysia’s multicultural society, we can benefit greatly from these values.

### Who is the Japanese person who has influenced you the most?

I went to Japan in 1998 for my studies. Initially, I faced challenges with discipline. I vividly remember an elderly gentleman, a former soldier, who took care of me and my friends during our time in Japan. He taught me three important things to succeed in Japan:

Learn about Japanese culture, knowledge, and core values before finishing university and returning to Malaysia.

Maintain good health by eating enzyme-rich foods like natto, a traditional Japanese dish that I found particularly beneficial as a poor student dealing with Japan’s high cost of living. At the time, a meal cost 3,000 yen,

while Malaysian factory workers earned just RM150.

Embrace Japanese customs, such as enjoying hot springs, which promote relaxation and help build relationships, both personally and professionally.

### What is your favorite place in Japan?

My favorite place is Hokkaido, and I also love Kyoto for its rich history, as it was once the capital of Japan. Kyoto showcases many Japanese traditions. I also enjoy visiting Kyushu and Shikoku, two newer places I have come to appreciate. During my studies in Japan, I spent all my time in Tokyo, and after graduating, I returned to Malaysia without working in Japan. Back in Malaysia, I worked for Panasonic and Toray, traveling around Asia in sales roles. After 20 years, I left that career behind and started a new journey in Japan as a tour manager.



### What is your favorite Japanese food?

I used to love seafood, especially dishes like tempura and sashimi. However, due to personal reasons, I have since become 100 percent vegetarian. Despite this change, I can still enjoy my travel to Japan, as the hotels are very accommodating, serving me vegetarian ‘kaiseki’ fine dining and multiple dishes that meet my dietary needs.



## What is the Japan custom/culture that you like the most?

I particularly enjoy the summer festivals held across Japan, with each prefecture celebrating in its own way, such as Bon Odori. What stands out to me is how actively Japanese people participate in their traditional festivals. In many other countries, traditional practices, including festivals and dances, are often not sustained. Preserving and passing on cultural values is important, and everyone has a role in keeping these traditions alive.



## What are the future plans of your organization in terms of promoting Japan?

My vision for MJS is to attract members from various backgrounds, as our association is not just for Japanese graduates but also includes locals and Japanese nationals, even though the number is small. We hope to continue to act as a platform for Malaysians interested in Japan. During my travels to Japan, I aim to build connections with various prefectures and often introduce Penang and MJS. I hope this brings to more interaction between Japan and Penang, especially for the younger generation. Our seniors have already laid a strong foundation, and it's our responsibility to continue and uphold these core values to strengthen the relationship between the two countries.

