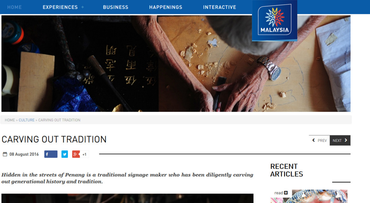


CARVING OUT TRADITION

08 August 2016 +1

Hidden in the streets of Penang is a traditional signage maker who has been diligently carving out generational history and tradition.

It's noon and the sweltering heat bakes the asphalt of Queen Street, the tourist trap of Penang. A spry old man carefully carves out a thick black wood, sometimes stopping to stare out into the street from his dark, small workshop. Kok Ah Wah has been at this since he was 16, and the heat now bothers him very little. Mr. Kok is the only specialist in his trade and may as well be the last of his kind: a traditional signboard engraver.

"The internet was always there, and my father was a patient teacher who was never fierce. This is a trade you can make a living of – it gives you money," he says. Mr. Kok took over the business from his father, who himself apprenticed under a local craftsman when he migrated from China after the Second World War.

The workshop is identifiable by a dilapidated traditional Chinese signage that hangs modestly above the shop bearing both Roman letters and Chinese characters: Kok Ying Chow Signboard Maker. Mr. Kok's workspace is spartan – himself only having less than five essential tools on his workable. Behind him are framed photographs in sepia, discoloured over years of sunlight and dust – but no less a reminder that he's been in this business for a very long time.

As he chisels and carves out a space in the wood, Mr. Kok demonstrates a tenacity that one could only find in tradesmen from generations ago. It is dedication that is gripped into his thin spry hands and patience that holds his small body frame together. His eyes rarely waver, pausing only momentarily to measure for the accuracy of his carvings. This is Mr. Kok five days a week, from morning until evening – stopping only for a brief siesta and lunch. When the day is done, he takes the bus back to Batu Lanchang, six kilometers away from his workshop.

"It's about RM1,000 for a normal signboard that measures 2 by 5.5 feet," he spreads his arms that fits the same length of the signboard he's currently working on. Despite working alone, Mr. Kok receives about three orders on average every month; the orders doubling during the auspicious Lunar month. Each board usually takes about three weeks to complete and usually comes in traditional gold against black.

"No matter what business you run, you will always need a signage." Though not all of his orders are from entrepreneurs, some are commissioned by and for clans and temples. The thing many of these orders have in common is that the signages are usually offered as gifts, the same way flower bouquets are given during a store launch. It's a gift so unique that each of these signages are personalised with a pantun that summarises the qualities of the recipient in a single line.

Mr. Kok walks to the back of his workshop, opening his cupboard and producing a measuring tape. He pulls the tape, showing the black and red markings that are not commonly found on your typical tape measurer. "You need a *feng shui* ruler to decide on the margins and so on." As per tradition, these signages need to adhere to its own set of *feng shui* rules in order to bring its owner prosperity and the best of luck. This includes measurements, right down to the number of letters present on the board.

Made of *Jelutong* wood, a completed signage can last for over a century and can be considered a generational heirloom. Unlike the signages he produces however, Mr. Kok's trade is unlikely to survive the next generation. He has five children and only one of his sons, 51, occasionally assists him with the carving and painting. "We've never discussed it [taking over the trade] but maybe he might consider."

For Mr. Kok, the qualities required in an interested apprentice are not much: "As long as there is a desire to learn, anyone is a teachable student. Anyone can be taught as long as they have the heart to learn." He is generally unsure of the trade's reception by the younger generation but admits that he occasionally has individuals and groups interested in lessons, many which come as often as they go.

His achievements are not gone unnoticed. Hanging behind him modestly is a plaque that confers him the Living Heritage status that was awarded to him by the Penang Heritage Trust in 2008, the only gold in the dark workshop apart from the paint that adorns his unfinished signboard. But for all the recognition he receives, Mr. Kok maintains that traditional signage making is his work, his living and pays little attention to anything beyond what lays on his work desk.

By Arif Anuddin
Photos by Arif Anuddin

THIS SCENE IS LIT

A UTC DAY OUT

+1

RECENT ARTICLES

Not Horsing Around

Naim Marjani is serious about preserving the art and heritage of the Kuda Kepang. We speak to the veteran practitioner to find out more...

George Town Festival

George Town Festival 01 August 2015 - 31 August 2015 Georgetown, Penang Heralded in the International New York...

Green Turtle Lays Eggs At Batu Ferringhi

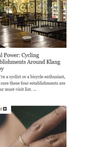
GEORGE TOWN: The green turtle laboured out of the sea, made its way up the beach, marks a dry nest and then followed up with its primary nest about ...

10 Reasons To Live In Malaysia

Malaysia is emerging as a top destination for expatriates seeking to live and work in Asia, here are the top ten reasons why...

Facts & Figures

A compilation of key facts and figures about Malaysia and its current economic condition.



1Malaysia Mega Sale Carnival

1Malaysia Mega Sale Carnival 27 June 2015 - 31 August 2015 Nationwide The country's biggest shopping extrava...

A Man Of Many Hats

Pejuh Rahah branding father Mohd Zayyana is determined to tap into Malaysia's deep pool of artistic and musical talent, starting...

Food For Change

Three young Malaysians are working to empower refugees living in Malaysia with a catering and food delivery business...

Pedal Power: Cycling Establishments Around Klang Valley

If you're a cyclist or a bicycle enthusiast, make sure these four establishments are on your must-visit list. ...

Five Malaysian Jewellery Makers You Need To Know

With a shared dedication to detail, focus on artistry and an eye for the sentimental, these are the five Malaysian jewellery makers you see...

Welcome to Wellness
There's a lot more to Malaysia than meets the eye. Join us in exploring the wonders 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

Copyright © 2015 - 2016 Malaysia Inc All Rights Reserved

CULTURE

Chinese Calligraphy In Malaysia

MON, 02 JUL 2018

Nie Chuang Hak has devoted over 50 years in pursuing his passion for calligraphy, a technically demanding practice of handwriting the...

CULTURE

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...

CULTURE

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...

CULTURE

Wats In Tumpat

MON, 26 FEB 2018

We take a look at the Buddhist temples that dot the town of Tumpat, Kelantan on the Thailand-Malaysia border. Situated on the nor...