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## BON VOYAGE

SPECIAL | SPH CONTENT LAB



Right: Mr Lee has been plying his trade for over 60 years. Far right: Kuan Yin Temple, one of Penang's oldest temples, is a stone's throw away from Mr Lee's home. Many joss sticks are used in worship here.

PHOTOS: MUHAMMAD IRWAN ISMAIL, JOSHUA WONG

# Living heritage

Penang's oldest joss-stick maker is a living example of passion and commitment to an old craft

JOSHUA WONG

FROM a mixture of fragrant sandalwood, sticky powder and water, Mr Lee Beng Chuan skilfully crafts joss sticks used by Buddhists, Taoists and other religious devotees on special occasions and to worship their gods.

The 90-year-old kneads the dough-like mixture onto bamboo sticks, which are then dried in the sun for two days before they are ready to be sold.

An icon in George Town, he is the oldest joss-stick maker in Penang. His fourth son, Mr Lee Chin Poh, says he is the only one who still makes joss sticks by hand.

### Picking up the craft

Mr Lee is one of many long-established craftsmen who continue to live and work in Penang. The coffee roasters, goldsmiths, perfume makers and rattan weavers, among others, make up an integral part of the Malaysian city's heritage.

Born and raised in Penang, Mr Lee set up a business making joss sticks after World War II. His father was a joss-stick seller until his death in 1935. Mr Lee took over the trade when he was 12.

He did not receive any formal training. Instead, he observed the workers at the factory where he bought his joss sticks and eventually picked up the craft.

Before her death in 2015, his wife helped him at the shop. Now, he is training the younger Mr Lee, 57, and daughter-in-law Khampan Buntuai, 52, to take over the business.

Says the younger Mr Lee: "I wanted to assist my dad and try my best to make the younger generation aware of heritage joss stick-making so that it does not go extinct." After his father dies, he plans to conduct short-term courses in joss stick-making for interested parties.

The elder Mr Lee's joss sticks, which cost from RM11 to RM50 (S\$3.70 to S\$17) per packet, are mostly sold to a loyal local clientele.



Using sandalwood imported from Australia gives his joss sticks a special fragrance that mass-produced ones lack.

### Keeping his word

Mr Lee continues to practise his trade at his shophouse in Lorong Muda in the heart of George Town's heritage district. The area is located near a mosque, Hindu temple, Taoist temple and South-east Asia's oldest Anglican church.

There, he is happy to talk about his craft, pose for photos and even give hands-on tutorials. For him, making joss sticks is not just his life's work — it is his passion.

Just before his wife passed away, she told Mr Lee to continue making joss sticks and giving them to others, so that they can have long and happy lives.

This is why he stoically carries on his craft despite his age.

"I give a lot of my joss sticks to others. It's a promise I made to my wife," he says.

True to his word, he regularly gifts chang shou xiang — longevity joss sticks — to neighbours and visitors on the first and 15th days of every Chinese lunar month.

After all, as he puts it: "Not everything is about money."

THE WRITER'S TRIP WAS SPONSORED BY TOURISM MALAYSIA AND MALINDO AIR.

### GUIDELINES

I flew to Penang on Malindo Air. The airline flies to Kuala Lumpur four times daily, from where travellers can take a transit flight to Penang.

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