

Digging up on a bygone era



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FOCUS

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Sharing a love for history: (From left) Chong Kah Yee, 21, Lai Zhi Xian, 22 and Kevin Leong, 22 in discussion with Lee in front of the mural showing Kajang's cultural map.

The fame of Kajang satay has overshadowed many other interesting facts about this old town.

Records have it that tin mining activities started in Reko (near Kajang) around 1840, while Kuala Lumpur was said to be opened up for mining in 1857. Its history is older than that of the country's

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Historical information are scattered all over the town but most of them remain unnoticed under the fumes of busy traffic, or smoke from the satay grill.

Old buildings are left weathered and artefacts stay buried; the story of Kajang is drowning in the waves of development.

But thankfully, this old side of Kajang has lately caught the interest of the young to carry out cultural mapping.



Old is good: Some of the items saved when businesses were closed and buildings were demolished, now on display at the Kajang Community Heritage Centre.

A group of students from the New Era College are enthusiastically digging up details about this town's bygone era and painstakingly documenting them to pass on the Kajang story.

Sensing their obligation to the community and its heritage, these students pursuing media studies as well as arts and design, are on the project on a voluntary basis.

It is no easy task but they found the right person to lead the way – former Kajang assemblyman Lee Kim Sin, who is the director of Kajang Community Heritage Centre formed under the Federation of Hulu Langat Tiong Hua Associations.

Lee, a teacher, was spurred to set up the centre in 2001 after discovering the scarcity of historical

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Today, the centre located next to the 100-year-old Shi Ye Temple has a collection of about 200 items in addition to photographs and oral history documentations. He is also penning a book on the history of Hulu Langat that is now 70% complete.

“In the past 10-odd years, I was basically doing this alone with some friends offering help here and there, thus it was heartening when the students and their lecturer approached me for this project,” Lee said.

“Our cultural mapping started in December 2013 but the idea was mooted way back in 2010 when the students felt the need to interact with the community around their college,” he added.

Kajang folk had the first taste of the fruit of their labour when the students drew a map based on their findings in February, on the wall of an old shophouse in the centre of the town.



Of historical value: The fontage of shophouses in Kajang have interesting details but only a few are well preserved.

An event concluding their research was held on March 14 and 15 at the Shi Ye Temple, and it proved to be a hit among the locals. Heritage walk was also conducted.

Media student Chong Kah Yee, 21, said she was exposed to the rise and fall of old trades when she conducted interviews for the college’s newsletters. She has interviewed about 20 shop owners, and felt sad that many of them had to close down as business plunged and their offspring went after

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business suffered huge losses,” she said.

Affectionately calling the shop owners “uncles and aunties”, she took a passionate interest in each story.



Dying trade: Low Woo Ngee,75,at his blacksmith shop that is struggling to stay afloat.

“Blacksmith, effigy making, watch repair and coffee shops that make their own *kaya* and stir-fry the coffee beans, among other things, these trades are soon disappearing,” she said.

Her course mate, Lai Zhi Xian, 22, said the cultural mapping effort had given them a more in-depth understanding of the community.

“There’s so much to learn from the older generation – how they went through life’s difficulties and how they kept their business afloat – it is a pity if the young ones miss the opportunity to learn from their experience,” he said.

Arts and design student Kevin Leong, 22, said he admired the wisdom of the people who built Kajang but lamented over the government’s bad town planning in recent decades.

“The roads and various facilities were so systematically located, there was a large stretch of greenery in the middle of the town and the river was flowing by the houses. I can imagine how Kajang was postcard-perfect just like some foreign towns,” he said.

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Following overwhelming response, the team has embarked on the second phase of the project highlighting new villages and religious institutions in the district.

The exhibition is still running at the Kajang Community Heritage Centre until the end of April. The gallery is open on weekends from 2pm to 5pm (from the second week of April onwards). Visits on weekdays can be arranged by appointment (call 012-260 1115).

“We are still getting calls from the public to organise more of such activities, especially the heritage walk,” Lee said.

While the interest for history and heritage seems to have been re-ignited in Kajang with young enthusiasts leading the way, Lee urged the authority to help the dying old trades through tax rebates or other incentives.

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