

Uncovering the *Tangible Stories* of Whampoa Residents

What do sewing machines, movie magazines, and styrofoam models of boats have in common? More than just objects, these also contain the stories of elderly residents in and around Whampoa.

Over two months, Associate Professor Thomas Kong and his team—art educator Jacelyn Kee, art therapist Lee Sze-Chin and photographer Peter Chen—have been working to uncover this grassroots heritage for *Tangible Stories*, a project of Curating Whampoa.

One such story belongs to Mdm Balbir Kaur and her mother's hand sewing machine. The 67-year-old inherited this Singer model after her mum passed on and has kept it in her flat at Upper Boon Keng Road since. By her recollection, the machine is over eight decades old.

"Those days you sewed everything," explains the retiree who frequents Whampoa's Central Sikh Gurdwara along Towner Road. "Most of our clothes, my mum would sew them, and she made us wear all these funny, funny clothes."

Another object Mrs Balbir happily showed the team during their two-hour visit was a huge pestle and mortar that she recalls grinding spices with as a child. Pointing out how the wooden pestle once as tall as her has halved in length over the decades, she joked, "All of it is now in our stomachs!"

These memories were documented and photographed by Associate Professor Kong and his team who have visited 18 families so far for their project. Other objects they have encountered include Chinese opera newspapers, a charcoal iron and even the ancient game Zhuang Yuan Chou, which is made from animal bones.

The idea of collecting stories about objects came about three years ago after Associate Professor Kong visited the flat of Whampoa resident, Mr Basri bin Lorban. Inside, he discovered the many styrofoam models of kampong houses, ships and planes that the retiree made to keep his mind and body active. "His story was what inspired me to do this project," says the professor.

Having collected so many stories since, Associate Professor Kong said he was struck by the generosity of the elders to share their stories and their challenge in keeping their objects, especially for those moving to a smaller flat or have no one to pass it on to.

Fortunately for Mdm Kaur, her daughter has already expressed interest in the sewing machine. No one has claimed the pestle and mortar yet. She adds that nobody had asked her the stories behind these objects until the *Tangible Stories* team visited. "I've been storing these in the house for years. Now, I feel very proud. They are like treasures to me."

Come 2017, the *Tangible Stories* project will move on to its next phase in collaboration with students and faculty from the School of the Arts Singapore's visual arts department. The *Tangible Companions Project* will see the team develop "contemporary companions" in response to the histories and qualities of the object, as well as the relationships their owners have with them.