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For educationist Sim Mow Yu, old is gold

Nonagenarian Datuk Sim Mow Yu lives out that adage.

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TREASURE of the community. Those words, beautifully written in Chinese calligraphy, adorn a plaque strategically placed above the family altar in the humble abode of Chinese educationist Datuk Sim Mow Yu in Malacca.

The calligraphy, etched in gold on a black plaque, was a gift to Sim on his 95th Chinese birthday last year. It was the highest tribute to a nonagenarian who has fought for the rights of Chinese education.

The plaque takes its place of pride for all to see. There are many other calligraphy plaques given to Sim, an accomplished calligrapher.



Wall of fame: Datuk Sim Mow Yu in the living room of his home in Malacca, where plaques and photos adorn the walls. – Pictures by UU BAN / The Star

Sim was born in Malacca on July 20, 1913. His father and grandmother came from Fukien, China. His name Mow Yu means “honouring Guan Yu” (a Chinese deity). His grandfather was a scholar in the Qing Dynasty and his father, Sim Hong Paik, one of Sun Yat-sen’s followers.

Sim made many sacrifices for Chinese education when he was head of Jiao Zong (the United Chinese Teachers Association) for over 28 years.

In 1933, he became a teacher after founding the Seng Cheong Night School in Malacca, the country's longest-standing private Chinese school. He was headmaster of the night school from 1945 until his retirement in 2002. He was also headmaster of SRJK (C) Ping Ming in Malacca, for 27 years.



Tribute: These characters mean 'Treasure of the community', referring to Sim Mow Yu.

In 2003, Sim won a place in the Malaysia Book of Records for being the longest-serving school principal for 57 years; 20,000 pupils received their education under his tutelage.

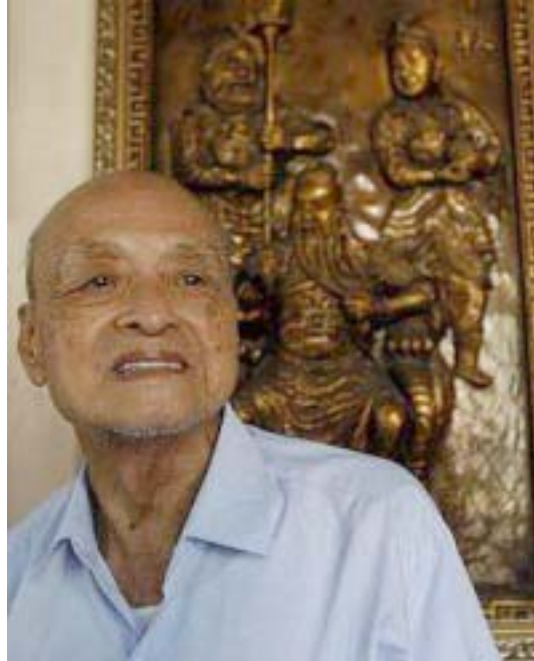
In his hometown, Sim is more than a household name; he is a familiar face. He is well-respected and people from every nook and corner know him.

"Everybody knows me," says Sim, who was happy to meet us when Star Two visited him for an interview. Sim's movements were slow; because of his weak legs, he uses a walking stick.

"Even though he is not a politician, many people know him for his role and influence in Chinese education," says Kay Keok, 60, his second daughter and sixth child among nine siblings.

Of her father's achievements, the retired bank officer says: "He strives to save the Chinese culture and language in the country so that their importance is not diminished.

Today, the Chinese language has become a common medium of communication. He has done a lot for Chinese education in the country."



Filial piety: ‘Confucius taught (people) to be cautious and care for the elderly until they are old or gone. Even after their demise, they must remember them.’

In 1966, Sim, who was then deputy chief of MCA Youth Wing, was expelled from the party “for fighting for Chinese language to be one of the official languages of Malaya,” says Kay Keok, who acted as interpreter for her father who felt more at ease conversing in Mandarin.

”He was arrested under the Sedition Act in the 1970s over the issue of Chinese education. In 1987, he objected to the Education Ministry’s decision (Anwar Ibrahim was then Education Minister) for appointing (some 100 senior assistants and principals) who were non-Chinese educated to hold administrative posts in vernacular Chinese schools.”

Sim was among over 100 promoters of Chinese education, who were arrested that year under the Internal Security Act in Operasi Lallang. He was detained for two years.

“Last August, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim came with Tian Chua (a Malaccan) to visit me,” interjects Sim. Apparently, Tian Chua came with his father to approach Sim to write the Chinese characters for PKR (which is Kung Chen Tang in Mandarin). Tian Chua’s father, a rice dealer in Malacca, knows Sim very well. Kay Keok explains that Anwar “had come to pay respects” to her father who is revered by the Chinese community.

Sim’s four-room house in Jalan Bandar Hilir, Malacca, is a hive of activity. “Every day, I get lots of visitors (including his children and their families, friends and well-wishers),” says Sim.

The nonagenarian has six sons and three daughters. Five of his children live in Malacca, while the others are in Johor, Kuala Lumpur and Palembang in Indonesia. Sim lost his third child, a daughter, due to illness in 1998. His wife passed away in 2004.

Sim's extended family numbers 700 and is now in its fifth generation. He has 24 grandchildren and 25 great-grandchildren.



Birthday present: A Chinese painting depicting Sim on his trusty bicycle, by artist Yang Liew Nan.

Some 300 families came together to celebrate his 95th Chinese birthday last year.

Sim's children in Malacca take turns to stay with him on a weekly basis. Treasured photographs add colour to various sections of the house. There were a couple of family photographs, a photo of Sim as a young man, a photo of Sun Yat-sen and one which he took with Ma Ying-jeou (now Taiwan's president-elect) 14 years ago.

"Every month, there is a family dinner a la potluck style in this house. After the meal, we sing together," Sim says.

He is not fussy about food; he eats whatever is put on the table, says Kay Keok.

A simple man, he used to ride his trusty old bicycle all over Malacca. The bicycle has been his main mode of transport for as long as he can remember. It is still parked in the compound.

Artist Yang Liew Nan from Klang vividly captured Sim's trademark style of going about town in his bicycle in a painting which he presented to Sim on his 90th birthday.



Sim as a young man.

Asked about his secrets to long life, Sim says: “I have no longevity secrets. My mother was a strong woman who lived to a ripe old age of 101. She gave me good genes. My father passed away at 77; at that time, he was considered to have lived to a good, old age.”

Despite his age, Sim still practises calligraphy whenever he feels like it. He says it helps to bring out his inner qi (life force). Sim, who has three calligraphy books, likens calligraphy to “taking health supplements”.

He still keeps a diary, something he has been doing for the past 40 years.

These days, when he is in the mood, Sim plays the organ. “It is a health-promoting exercise. Legs are paddling, fingers dance on the keyboard, eyes focus on the music notes, ears are attentive while I sing and play my organ,” says Sim.

“When I sing, qi comes out through my mouth.”

Honouring parents

OF THE 100 Chinese values, filial piety is the one of the most significant in Chinese culture, says Chinese educationist Datuk Sim Mow Yu, who is a Buddhist and Confucianist.

In ancient times, Chinese emperors emphasised the importance of filial piety and even went down on their knees to pay respects to their departed elders.

“Confucius, the sage of China, wrote a book on filial piety. He had 3,000 students.

He taught everyone to practise filial piety,” he says. “Confucius taught them to be cautious and care for the elderly until they are old or gone. Even after their demise, they must remember them.

“In China, when Confucius passed away, his followers guarded his grave for three years to show their filial piety.”

The Chinese instil the importance of filial piety in their children from a very young age. That is why they are able to live together in harmony for generations.

In the old days, the Chinese would never allow their parents to be taken care of by others. There were no old folks’ homes too during that time. In Eastern culture, children and grandchildren are relied upon to fulfil their obligations of looking after the elderly.

Ask if the younger generation was deemed “sinful” for sending their elderly parents to old folks’ homes and nursing centres, Sim was non-judgmental. He tries to understand what it is like to be in their shoes.

“Some have no choice,” he says, resigned to the fact that some career-minded children have to work and are unable to care for their elderly parents.

Changing times have also affected the way elderly parents are being treated. ”With extended families, the grandchildren can spend time with their grandparents, and the family is more closely knit.

There is more warmth in such households,” says Sim.

He seems resigned to the fact that Western influence has also brought about a shift in cultural practice.

“If elderly parents are sent to old folks home, the children must visit them frequently and show them love. They should not just pack them off to such centres and forget about them.”