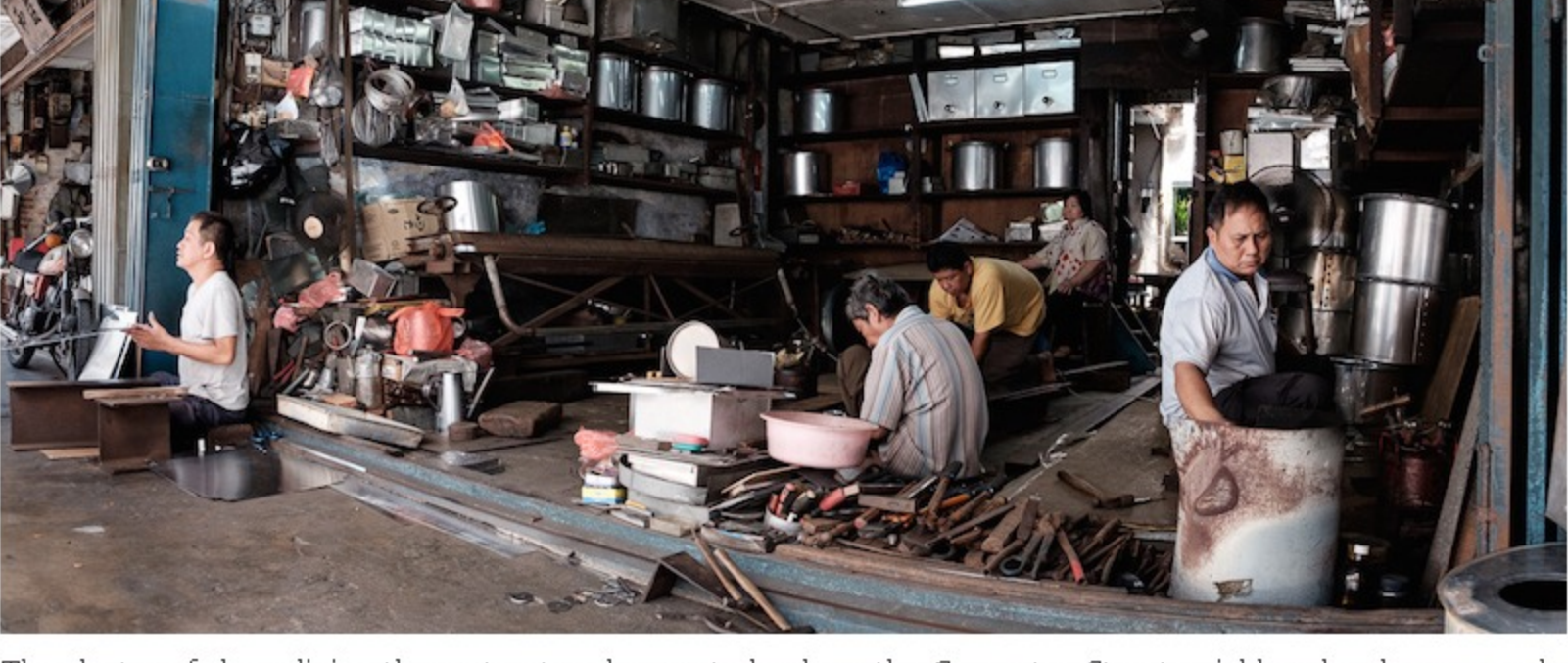


TINMEN WITH BEATING HEARTS

20 April 2017

Turning into the little road known as China Street in Kuching, the first thing you hear is a metallic clanking sound. The sound continues as you loop back to the Main Bazaar along Bishopgate Street. This is the sound of Kuching's tinsmithing workshops, the clang of tools hitting metal sheets. The two parallel roads are where industrious craftsmen can be seen in action, some of them sitting out in the five-foot way because their shops are so small.



The cluster of shops lining these streets – known to locals as the Carpenter Street neighbourhood – are made up from a varied bunch that get along well with another. While some of the shops are filled to the brim and alive with the hustle and bustle of workers working in the heat of hot flames, others have lone craftsmen.

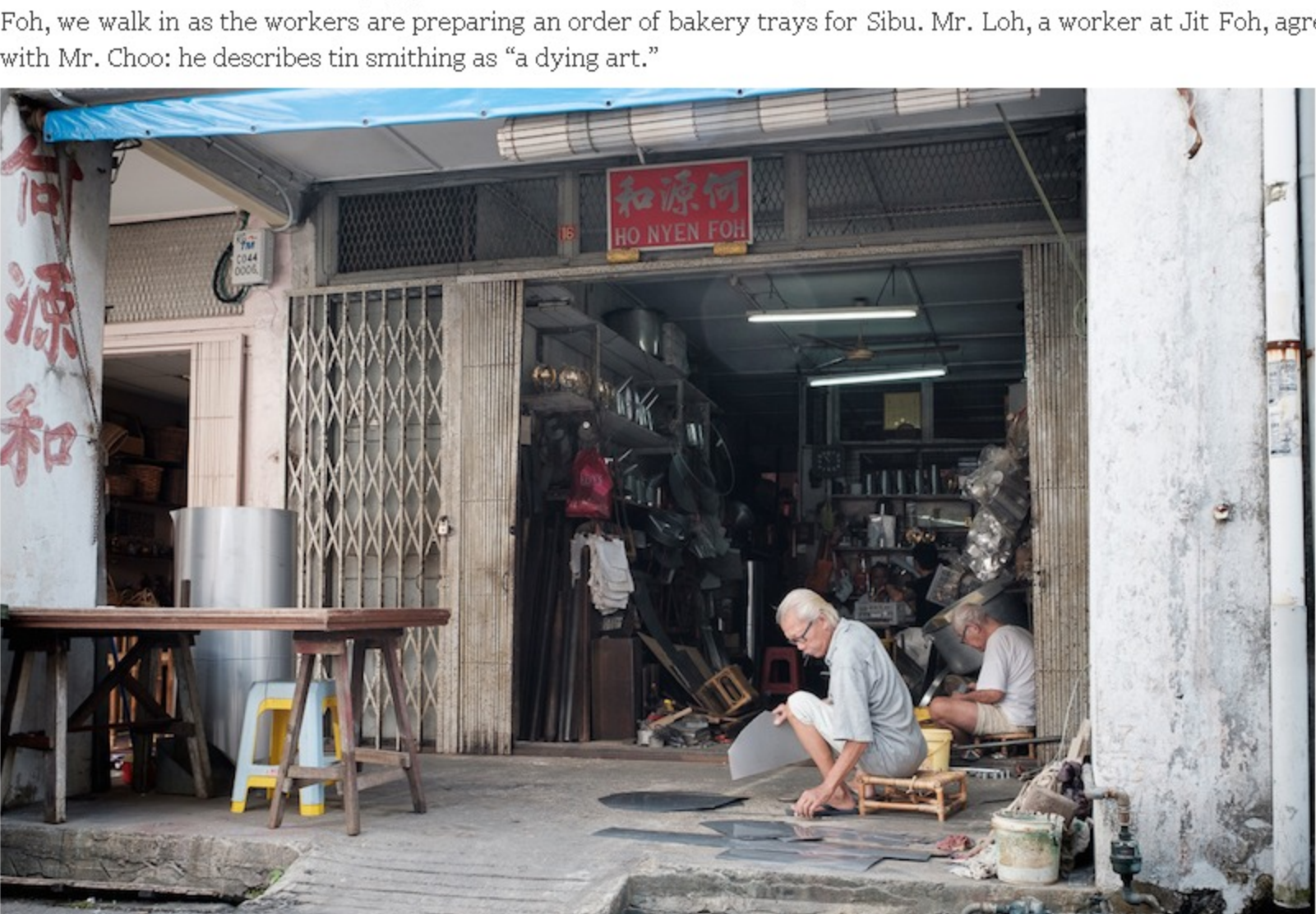
Mr. Choo is one of these lone craftsmen. The owner and sole worker of Hoon Yang has been in the trade for 40 years, following in the footsteps of his father, who passed the business to him. But he doubts it will be around in another 40 years.



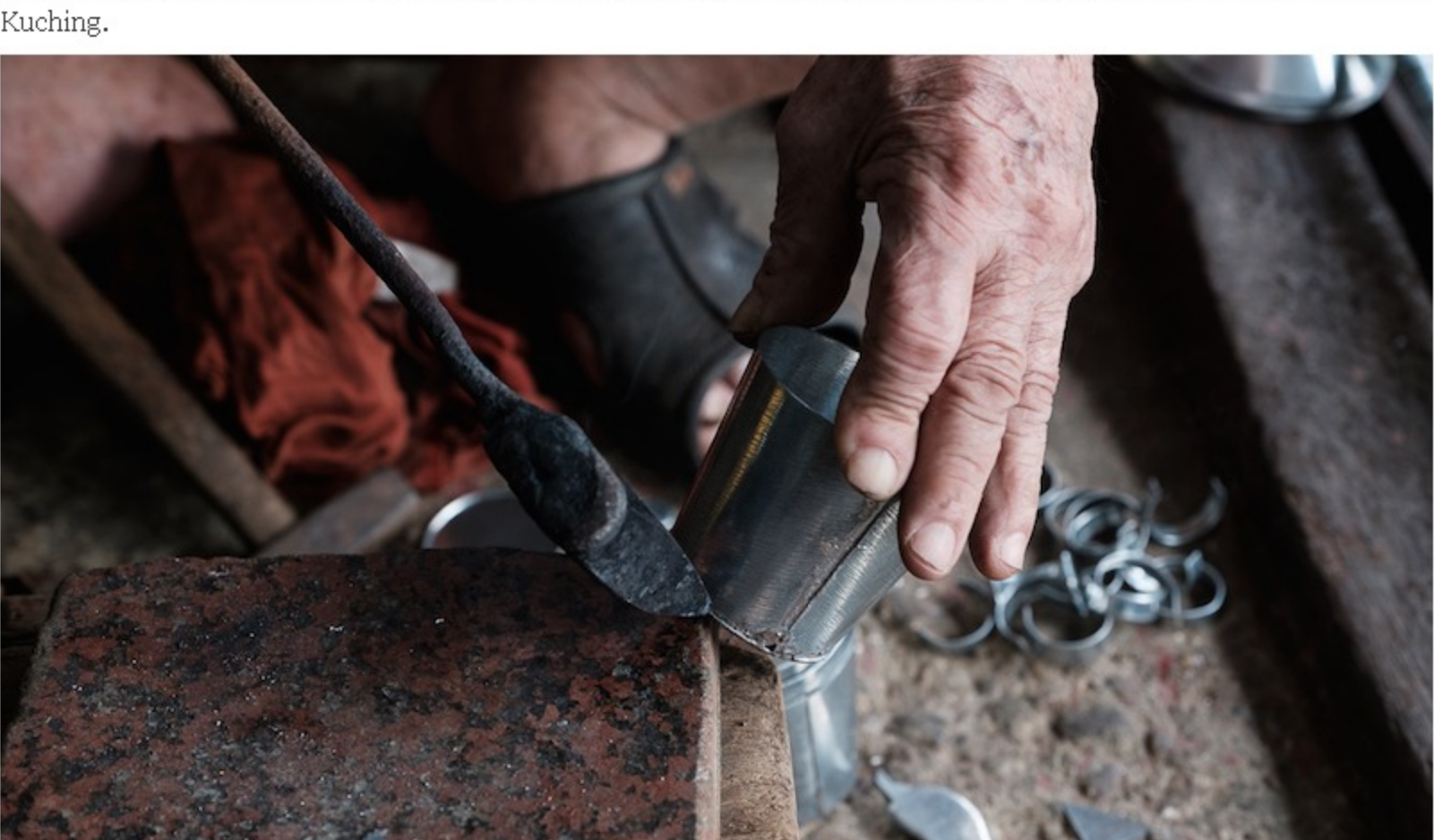
"[The business] cannot be continued," the 70-year old craftsman says repeatedly, "*Bu nen gou*," not possible, he says, shaking his head as he attaches the base of a kopitiam coffee kettle using melted tin mixed with hydrochloric acid.

The story is one that is familiar by now; the children of the tinsmiths have no interest in continuing their profession, despite these men seeing their art as something to be treasured. Working in his almost empty shop, possibly on the same spot that he has been sitting for decades, Mr. Choo expresses a bitterness. He is happy that his children will be saved from his life of hard labour, but there's a sense of loss that there is nobody to take over the helm.

Like the echo of the metal clanking, will the tinsmith trade fade away within our lifetime? At another shop called Jit Foh, we walk in as the workers are preparing an order of bakery trays for Sibn. Mr. Loh, a worker at Jit Foh, agrees with Mr. Choo: he describes tin smithing as "a dying art."

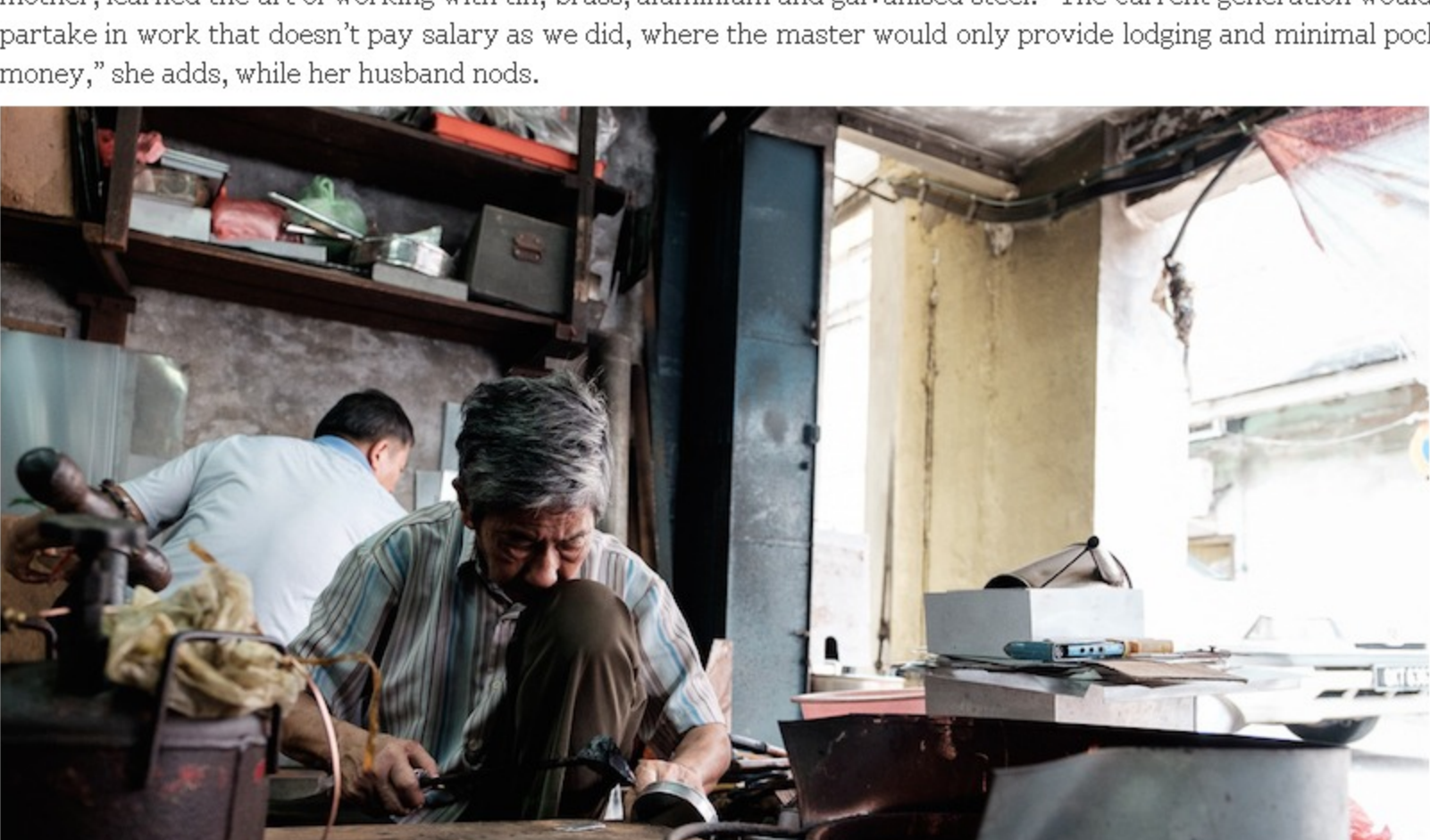


Ho Nyen Foh, a shop on Bishopgate Street, is managed by a couple, Mr and Mrs Ho. "This shop was established in 1927, and now it is run by my husband, the third generation, taking over from his mother," Mrs Ho tells me. She brings out a stack of laminated cuttings from newspapers and magazines, filled with writings about the tinsmiths of Kuching.



It is evident from the news cuttings and from their demeanour that Mr. and Mrs. Ho have become the unofficial spokespersons for the community of tinsmiths in this area.

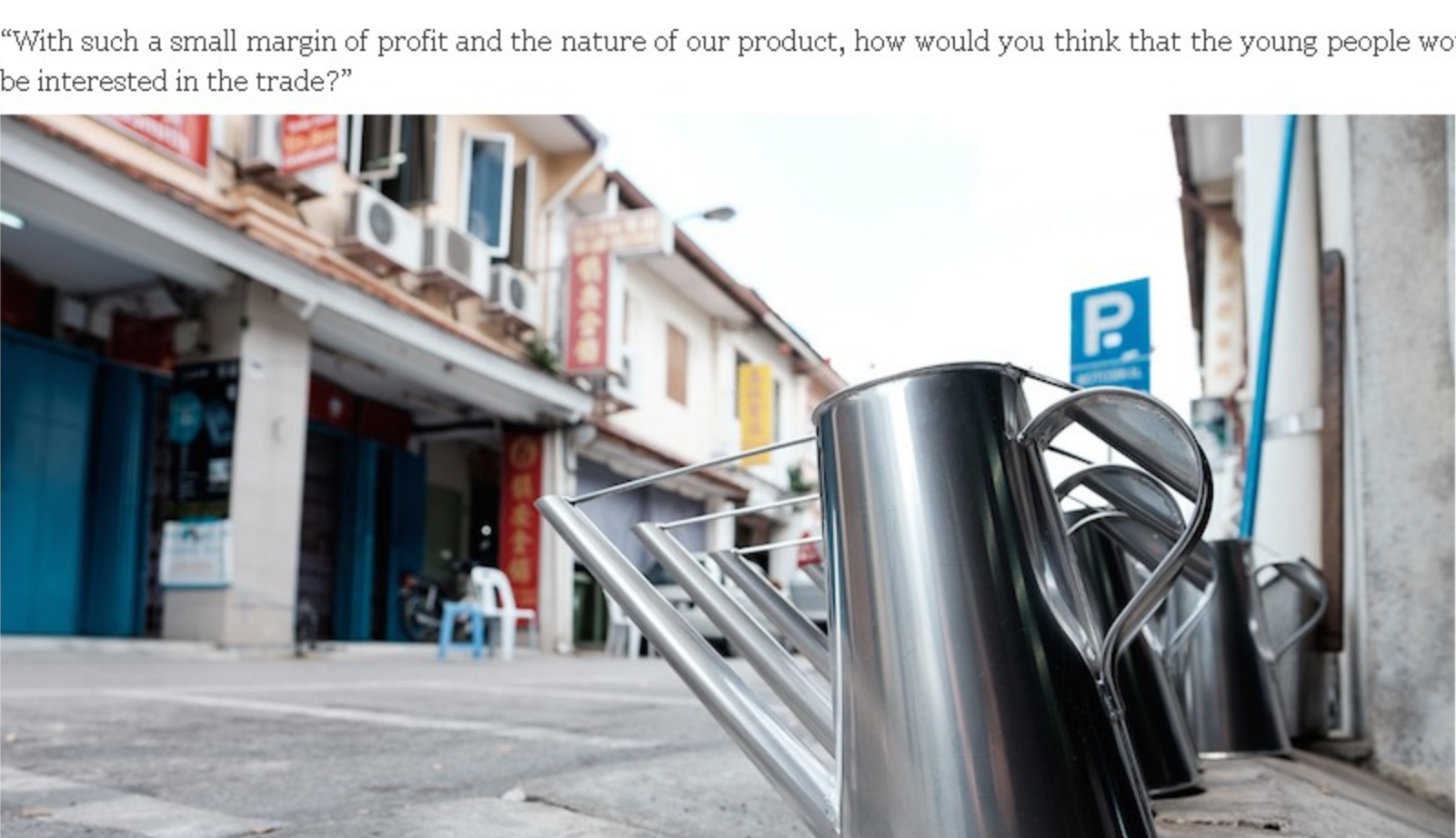
"No young people nowadays are willing to go through what we've been through," says Mrs. Ho, referring to the practice of traditional apprenticeship. This was when all the craftsmen and craftswomen, like Mr. Ho's retired mother, learned the art of working with tin, brass, aluminium and galvanised steel. "The current generation wouldn't partake in work that doesn't pay salary as we did, where the master would only provide lodging and minimal pocket money," she adds, while her husband nods.



"Believe it or not, we have been doing this business for 90 years, and yet we still couldn't afford to buy the shop we occupy," Mrs. Ho says frankly. "Business is only enough to cover our daily expenses."

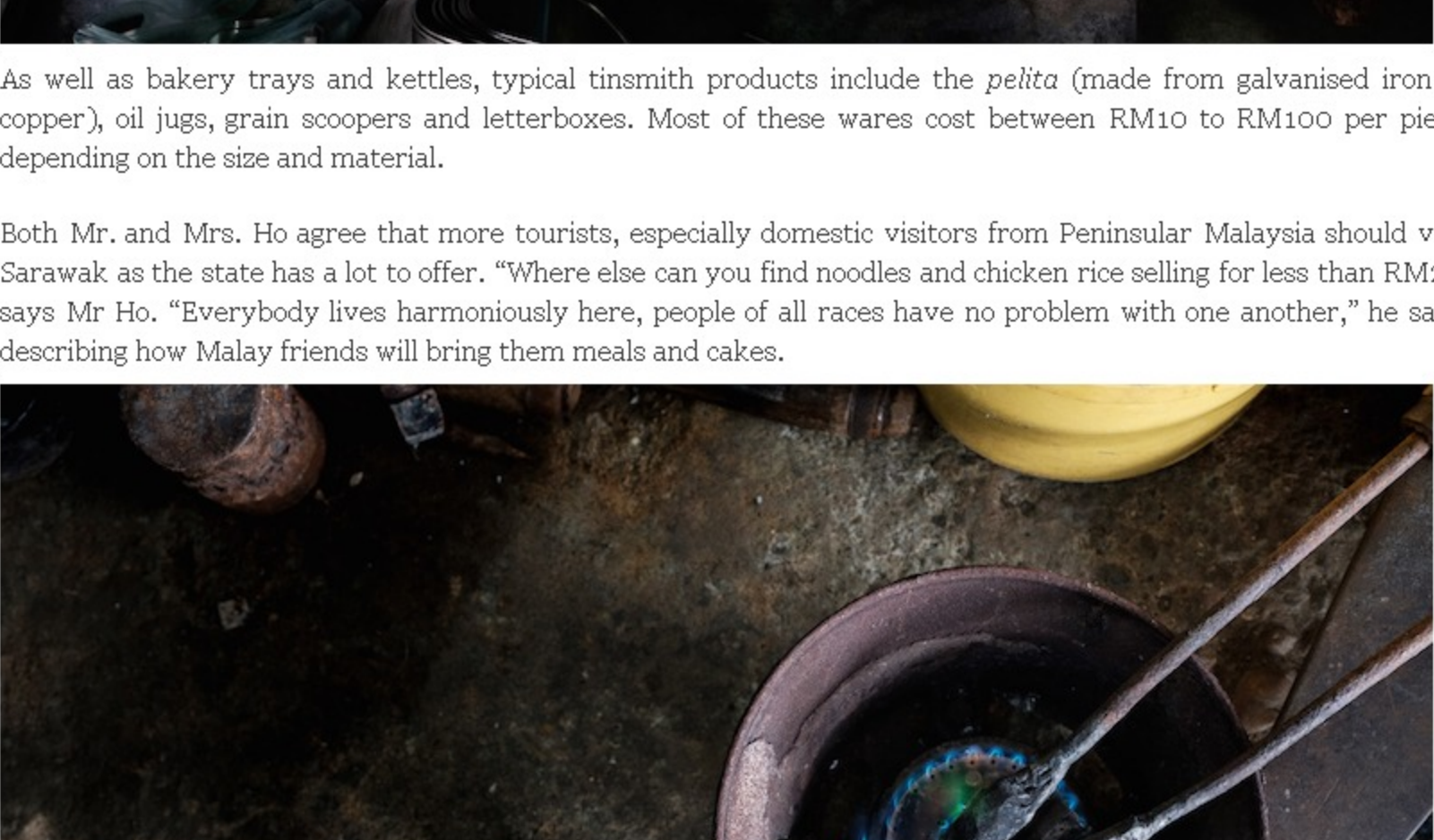
The workmanship of the tinsmiths appears to be a double-edged sword, producing appliances sought after for their quality, while this same quality deters repeat purchases. "Our products could last our customers up to 10 years, or even more if they use it properly," Mrs. Ho says. She tells the same thing to customers who ask for discounts.

"With such a small margin of profit and the nature of our product, how would you think that the young people would be interested in the trade?"



As well as bakery trays and kettles, typical tinsmith products include the *pelita* (made from galvanised iron or copper), oil jugs, grain scoopers and letterboxes. Most of these wares cost between RM10 to RM100 per piece, depending on the size and material.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Ho agree that more tourists, especially domestic visitors from Peninsular Malaysia should visit Sarawak as the state has a lot to offer. "Where else can you find noodles and chicken rice selling for less than RM2?" says Mr Ho. "Everybody lives harmoniously here, people of all races have no problem with one another," he says, describing how Malay friends will bring them meals and cakes.

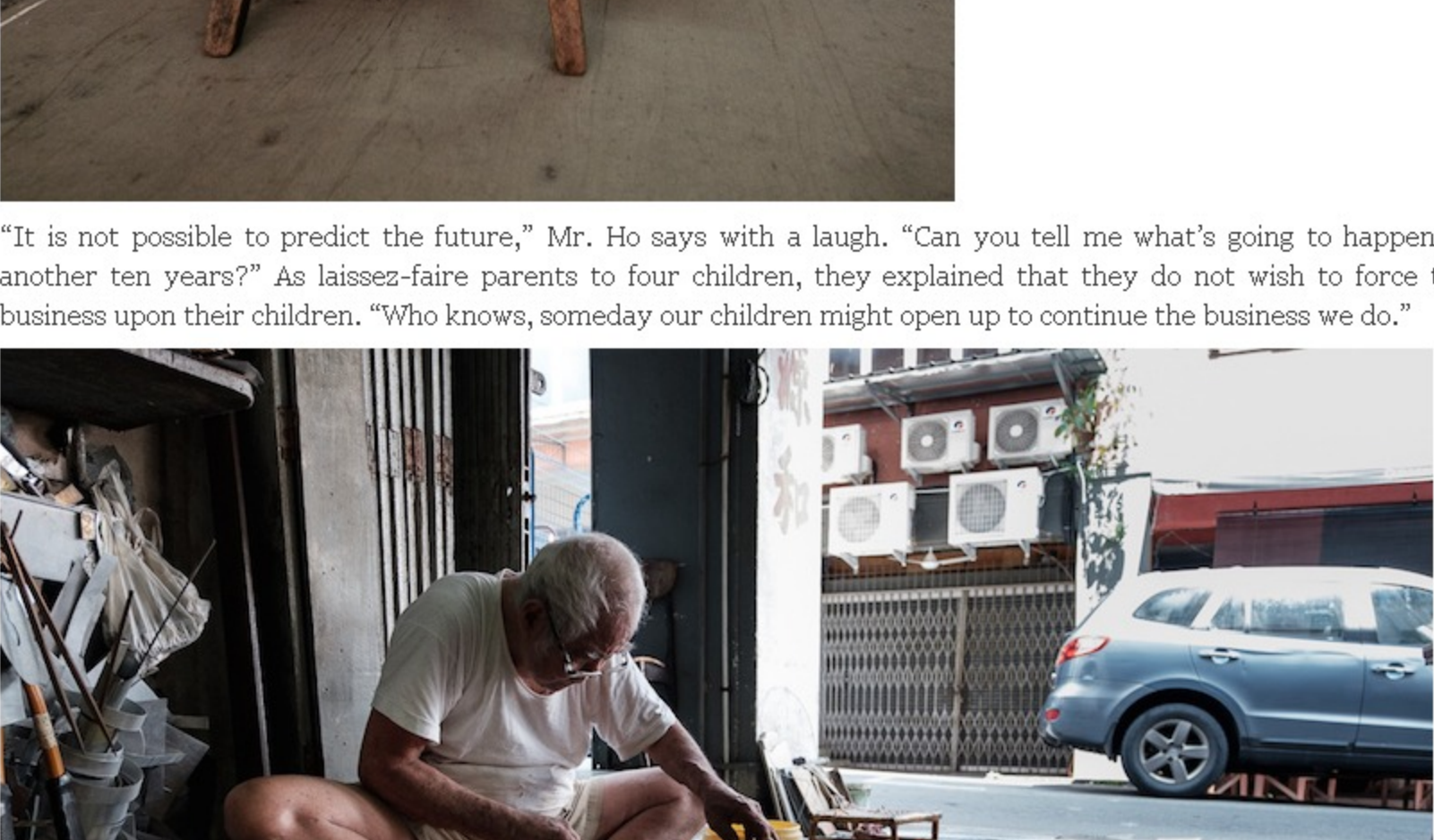


But although tourists may have taken an interest in tinsmithing, this does not necessarily make it sustainable. As Mrs. Ho explains, "Our friends always tell us how our location is perfect to benefit from the tourism but the fact is, we rarely sell anything to tourists". She recounts how offended she feels whenever tourists assume that their products are cheap. "People should realise how hard it is to produce what we make."

Unlike other ethnic crafts in the state, the couple reveals that there is an absence of governmental support to preserve their craft. However, when asked how they would feel if the business was to end under their watch, a decade shy of a century, they remain optimistic.



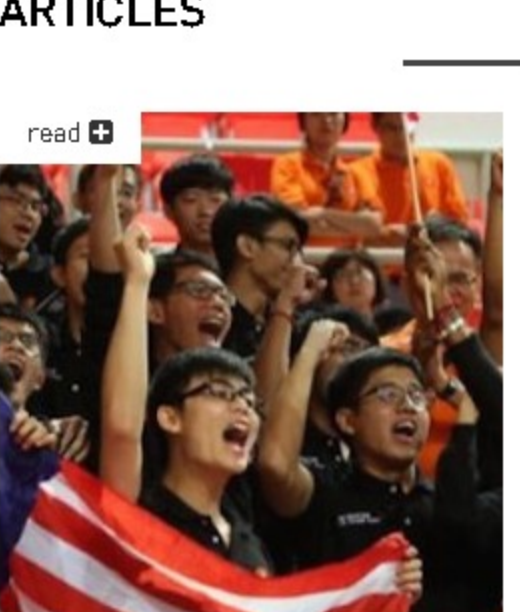
"It is not possible to predict the future," Mr. Ho says with a laugh. "Can you tell me what's going to happen in another ten years?" As *laisses-faire* parents to four children, they explained that they do not wish to force the business upon their children. "Who knows, someday our children might open up to continue the business we do."



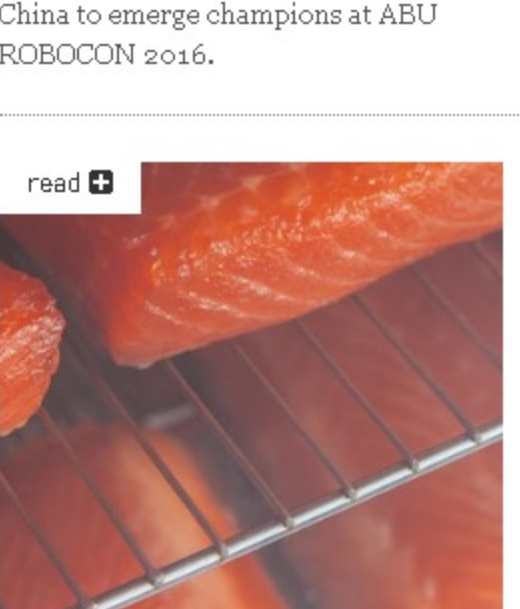
Jit Foh, No. 3, China Street, 93000 Kuching
Hoon Yang, No. 7, Bishopgate Street, 93000 Kuching
Ho Nyen Foh, No. 16, Bishopgate Street, 93000 Kuching

Text by Yuen Kok Leong
Photos by Jee Poong

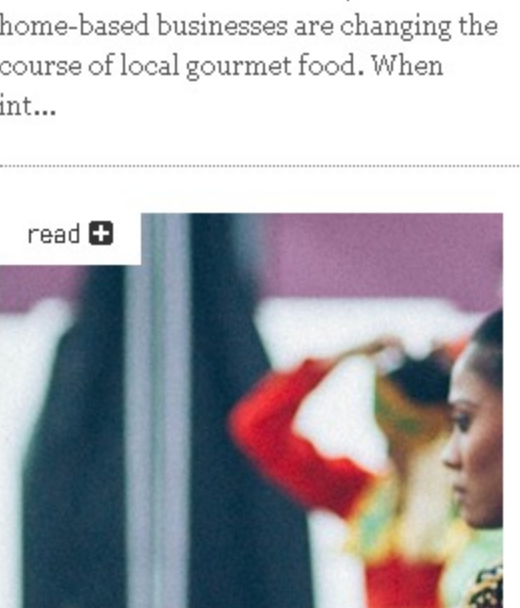
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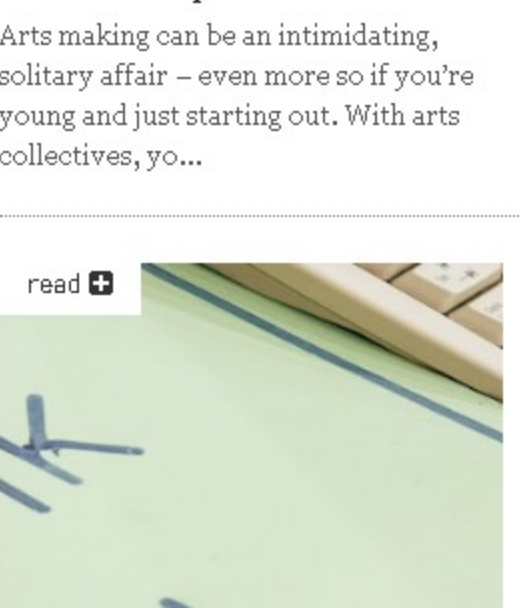
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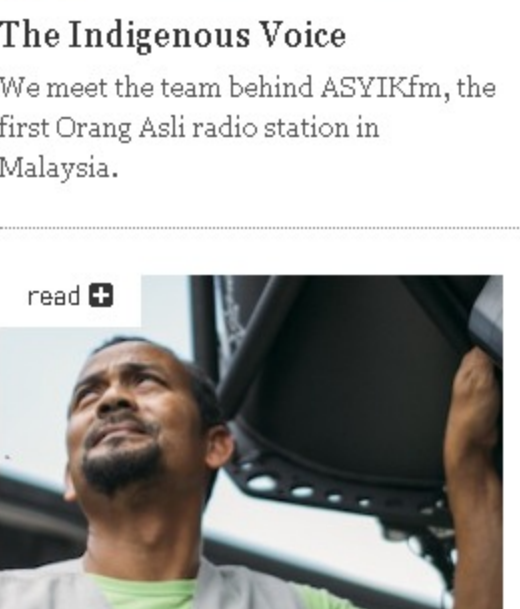
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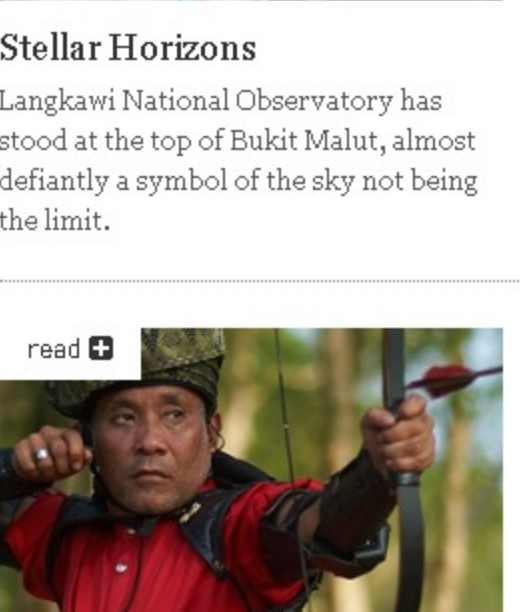
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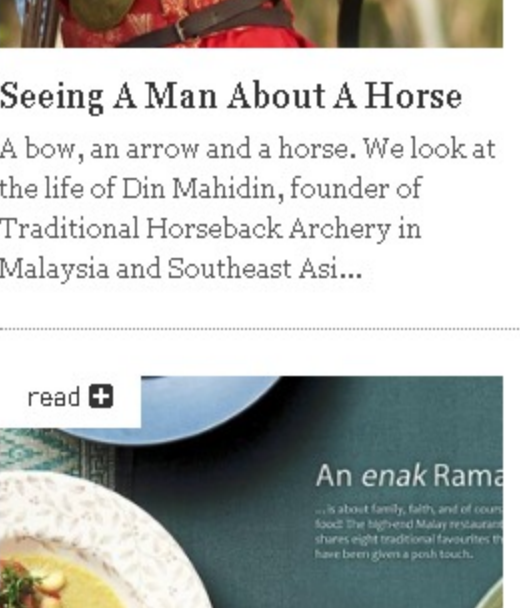
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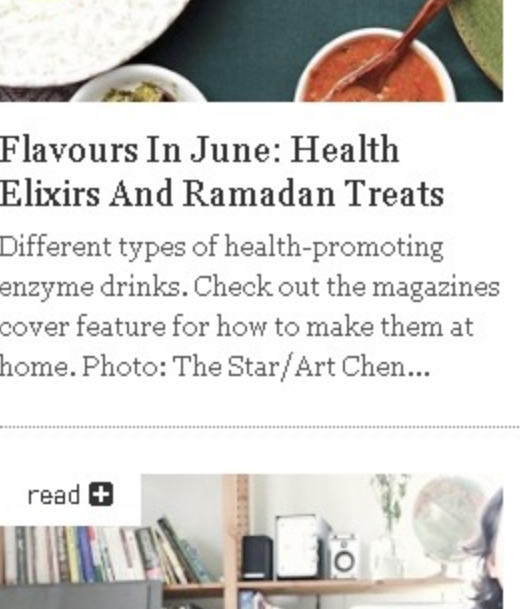
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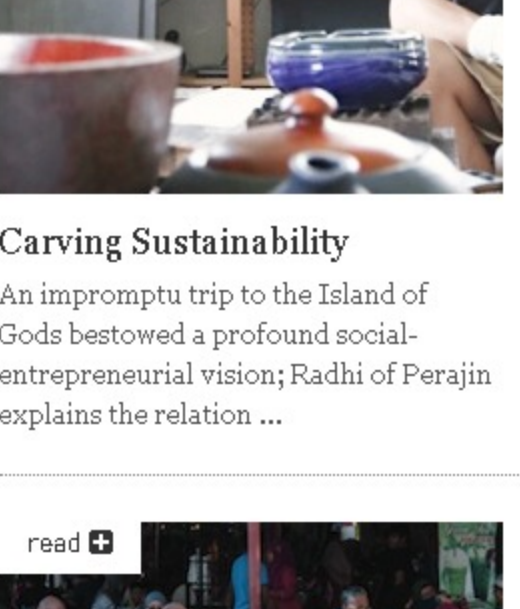
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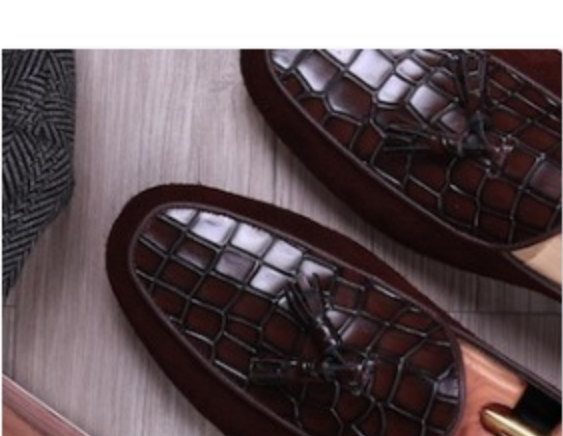
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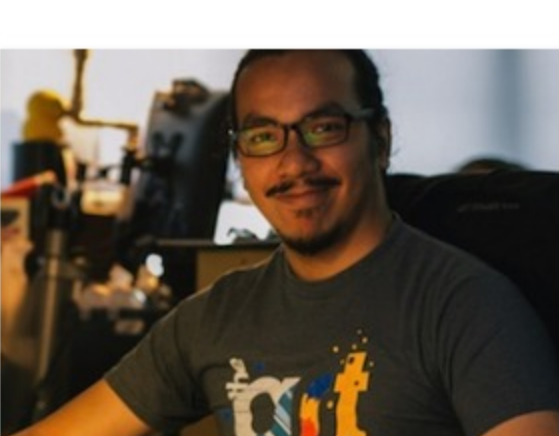
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