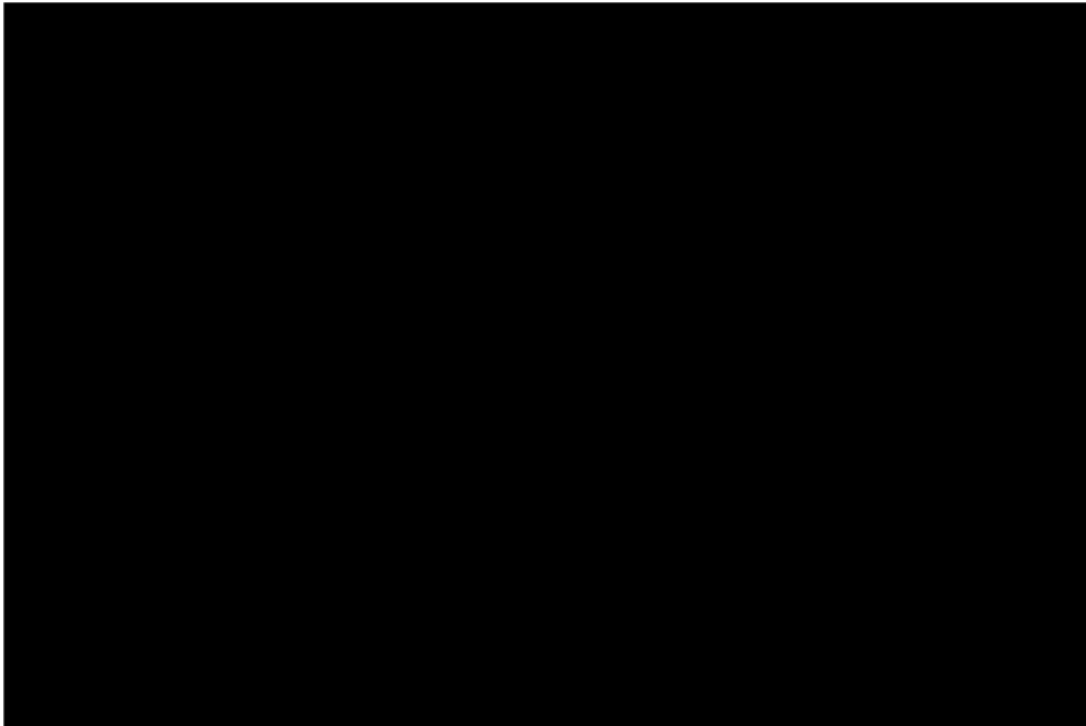


A man's mission to leave footprints

The untold story of a cobbler

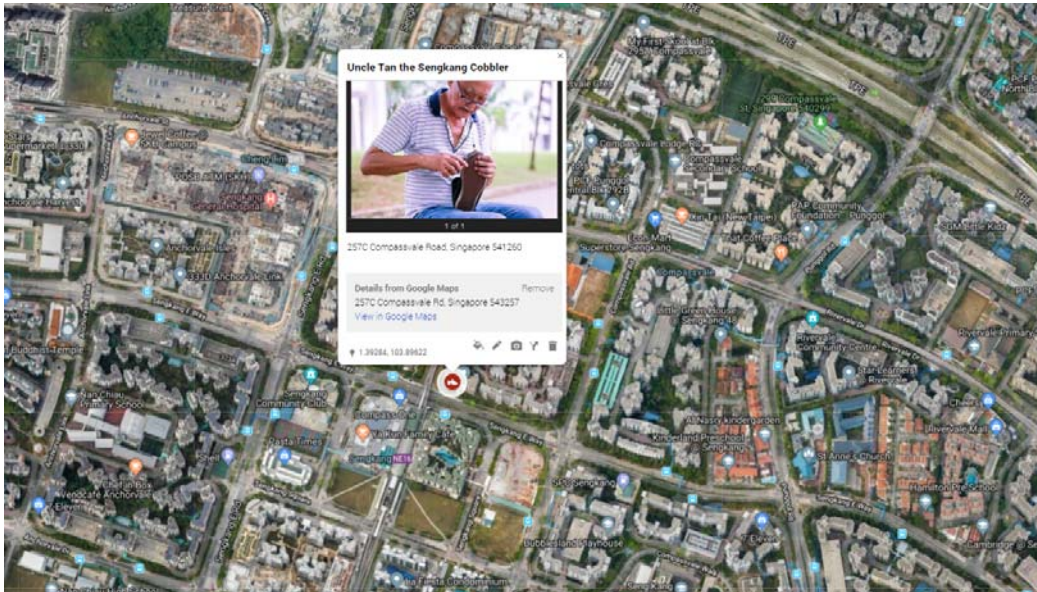


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Rapid modernisation has led to the phenomenon of vanishing trades and diminishing cultural heritage. Sidewalk cobblers who were once prevalent in most neighbourhoods, have become a rare breed these days. Once a common sight along sidewalks, five-foot-ways and back lanes, the age of disposables and trends has seen a falling demand for cobblers in the nation.

A man affectionately known as Uncle Tan the Sengkang Cobbler is one of the last few traditional cobblers currently working in Singapore. When asked about his thoughts on chain shops and franchises, such as Shukey and Mister Minit, that offer leather care services and have slowly eroded into his market, the old time shoemaker just smiles and replies that he'll "never close his shutters as long as [he] can still walk and cut leather".

Despite the dearth of old school shoemakers, Mr Tan still toils at his craft in a small makeshift counter beside the taxi stand opposite Compass One, where he's intent on preserving the vanishing skill. The influx of mass-produced shoes that saturate the market and the rise of business franchises offering leather care services have taken away most of his business, but he still refuses to let his artisanal craft go and hang up his proverbial boots quipping that "a man is never too old for some good old fashioned work".



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He sets up his counter daily, equipped with his handy hammer, millstone, penknife and glue that have been in his arsenal for the better part of five decades, and gets to work right after breakfast with a bright smile in his face. Always enthusiastic to have a little chat, the 76-year-old is rolling back the years despite being bounded by ageing ailments and sicknesses.

A recent health scare has him recuperating in the hospital but when spoken to him, he jovially mentions that he can't wait to be back fitter than before.

He laments that there are no more than 300 street cobblers left in the nation and said that the government has stopped issuing permits to traditional street cobblers. He mourns that it is just a matter of time before the craft vanishes and there will be no traditional cobblers left operating.

Reminding us that romanticising the past isn't enough to preserve the nation's heritage as "we lose a cobbler forever every time one passes away".