

Grandma Kang's labour of love

By CHRISTINA KOH

IPOH: Crafting beaded slippers is a unique Nyonya art that can be just as exacting today as it was for a prospective bride who would in the old days make them for her husband-to-be or her in-laws.

However, for grandmother Kang Sim Hun, 84, it is purely a labour of love that began since she was 14 years old in Penang.

The beads are a mere millimetre in diameter, but Kang is used to picking each one up with a curved steel needle to sew into a pattern that would give a pair of shoes breathtaking colour and vitality.

"This has always been a hobby I loved, even when it strains my eyes and I sometimes have to lie down and rest after an afternoon of sewing," she said when showing her work at her home here recently.

Despite her years, the grand dame always has a ready smile as she talks about her craft in Hokkien, while her daughter, retired teacher Lee Siew Chee, 55, translates.

A Peranakan of Teochew descent, Kang said her hobby began with the wandering peddler who would go from house to house selling trinkets like hairpins, talcum powder and shoes.

"Since I was a child, I would remember the sounds made by the peddler when he would shake his rattle-drum to announce his wares. The man would come to my grandfather's rambutan estate, where I was living with my mother (Lee Guat Looi), after my father passed away.

"Once, my mother held out a pair of the peddler's beaded shoes to me. She suggested I learn how to sew the shoe vamps, since I was not going to school and did not have much to do except to help her with housework," she recalls.

The peddler gave her a piece of cloth and a sample to work from, but she had no instructions and had to figure out how to sew the beads herself with some help from her mother.

The man would then pay her for every piece she finished, she recalled.

"After that, I went on doing beadwork, using only the very



GETTING SET ... Kang showing the embroidery kit she uses to sew the intricate beadwork on a pair of shoes at her Ipoh home. Below are some samples of Kang's intricate beadwork. — Starpix by Kamarul Ariffin

fine beads handed down from generation to generation.

"They are ancient, made of glass, and you cannot find beads like these in use anymore. I do not know where they come from," she said, although she believes they are from China.

As a girl, Kang started salvaging the beads from various sources.

Her daughter Lee said it was only the Nyonyas who used the beads and developed an entirely unique culture of weaving them into their clothes, hairpins, shoes and sarongs.

The delicate beads are believed to be *manek potong*, which were favoured by the ancient Nyonyas and sliced to give a faceted surface and a shimmery effect.

Lee said Nyonya brides would sew beaded shoes for

their prospective families, but the tradition began to die down in modern times.

Kang, for instance, did not follow that tradition when she married a clerk in Penang when she was 26 years old.

In the 1960's, to help supplement the family's income, Kang began selling shoe patterns to tailors who would pay her up to RM20 for each work that had caught a customer's eye.

She moved to Ipoh in the 1970s.

"Nowadays I only make them to give to friends, relatives and my three grandchildren," said Kang, who explained that sewing the patterns for a pair of shoes was a lot like cross-stitching.

First, she draws the shape of the shoe on fine cross-stitch cloth, and then decides on the kind of pattern she wants.

She then chooses the colours and counts how many beads she needs. The fine steel needle she uses, which is from China, costs RM16 each.

Some of her favourite designs range from roses, birds and animals like peacocks and dragons, abstract designs, and at one point, she even sewed the Seven Dwarves.

Kang has also quilted blankets and made gold embroidered handbags (*tekad emas*), but said that she preferred beadwork because it was more creative and challenging.

She keeps some of her favourite beadwork for herself, because she realises the old beads are quickly running out.

"The smallest alternatives I could find are the Japanese beads, but I don't like them very much because they are still not as nice or fine.

"Now I only have a few of the ancient beads left. When they are all used up, there will be no more," she said.

The grand dame, who is the mother of two children, obviously takes simple pride in her work.

"They are such pretty things, and look, the shoes and the soles can wear out over the years, but the beadwork will never fade.

"All you have to do is remove it and use it on another pair of shoes, and the colours will live on," she said.



DEEP IN CONCENTRATION ... Kang gingerly picking up some beads with her needle and (right) two pairs of slippers that bear Kang's hallmark touch.