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Niew displaying some of his treasured banknotes and coins.



Lye showing some of his collection. Lye's stall offers an array of coins and banknotes that date back to the 13th century.

Currency of yester Malaysia

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By Calyn Ong
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THE staircase leading to the lower ground of Amcorp Mall in Petaling Jaya was quiet and isolated but it is a total shift of environment once you set foot in this level.

The hustle and bustle of the flea market held every weekend is something that cannot be missed, especially for those who are looking for anything old and vintage.

Amid the throngs of people who are enjoying the thrill of bargaining and the excitement of getting hold of objects they would never find elsewhere, it is not difficult locating Tony Lye Fong Nge's humble stall.

Strategically situated right next to the staircase, Lye's stall offers an array of coins and banknotes that date back to the 13th century.

"Have a look at this first," Lye said while passing over a piece of paper titled "Admiral Zheng He's Tin Cash Coins".

It is not a wonder why that is the first thing on his mind during the interview because after all, it was for these tin cash coins that got him into this industry.

Lye's encounter with various tin coins in the early 70s has left a deep impression on him.

Seventy-three-year-old Lye is the vice-president of the Malaysian Numismatic Society founded in 1968 and is now the only founder member left in the society.

Lye, who is also a coin dealer, has over 40 years of experience in collecting coins and banknotes.

"I used to own a shop in Sungai Wang Plaza, selling these (coins and banknotes). "When I needed some turnover, I sold some of the collections I had in sets, which explains why I no longer have a fixed collection now," explained the numismatist.

At a glance it seems as if Lye's collections come in all types, shapes and sizes.

"You have no choice. Sometimes you

won't get what you want, partly because they're so expensive.

"So anything that comes along and is within my reach and means, I will buy them," said Lye, who has travelled to many countries, including Hong Kong, United States of America and Britain to take part in auctions and attend conventions.

"The RM1 of year 1982 and 1985 coins are among the few which are highly sought after. Same goes to the RM10 1961 banknote which bears the bullock cart on the obverse side of the banknote. Not forgetting, the 1st and 2nd series of Malaysian banknotes which are highly valuable as well," quipped Lye, adding that he has long sold off those items.

When asked if he has ever regretted selling some of his collections, Lye confidently said, "I have no regrets. I have always intended to sell everything I collect. However, I will give the rare ones to my son."

As a veteran in this industry, Lye cannot help but notice the changes in the

country's coins and banknotes.

"For me personally, RM1 and RM5 of the newest series of Malaysian banknotes (fourth series) have really nice and vibrant colours.

"It's a good change. After some time, there must be something different to interest and attract people because people get fed up easily if there are no changes," he said.

Dickson Niew collects coins professionally and what was a hobby turned into a full-time job.

Niew transcribed his passion by setting up a counter aptly named 'Dickson Niew Collection Corner' in a shop shared with his friend who sells old vintage tea.

"I was a marketeer. Although it pays me good salary, I didn't find joy in it. Only thing I got was unnecessary stress.

"But being a coin dealer and collector is a whole different story. The satisfaction from discovering new coins and banknotes is something that I will not give up for anything else," he explained.

Niew is no stranger to the numismatic industry.

"I've always liked coins and banknotes. When I was younger, I collect everything that comes by because it's free and it lasted until now.

"Children these days should do that too. Rather than asking their parents to get them iPad, iPhone and consoles, they can pick up a hobby like coin collecting instead," Niew quipped.

According to him, coin collecting is the best way to learn history.

"Bank Negara has consulted us on this ... for our expertise and hopefully it can be done within next year," he said adding that it's best to be done at school level because children pick up things faster when they are younger.

When asked if there is a reason why he

equates history to his hobby, 51-year-old Niew brightened up.

"Here," he said while passing over a plastic-wrapped note. "It's called the JIM (Japanese Invasion Money) notes or more commonly known as *duit daun pisang*."

"When you come into contact with old banknotes like this one, you will try to look for its background. Imagine the things you will learn along the process, from the dates, usage and period of inflation ... of course you can get all this from the textbook but where is the fun?" he laughed.

True to his words, despite dealing with money everyday, not many of us know when Malaysia first got its very own series of coins and banknotes.

"Even after independence, we were still using the British coins and banknotes. Our first series only came in 1967 and they are known as the Parliament coins because of the design on the reverse side of the coin which bears the Parliament building.

"Sometimes I see people brushing off the need to change our coins and banknotes. What they don't know is that these too, have their lifespan.

"An average lifespan of a coin is 20 years, which is why our second series of coins only came in 1989 and the third and newest series in 2011," he explained.

With years of experience and knowledge in this industry, Niew cannot help but points out the obvious changes in the currencies between then and now.

"During my time, we can get a *pau* or *roti canai* with just 1 sen. RM50 can get you an acre of land," he said while showing the older series of banknotes.

While pointing to an old RM50 banknote, Niew said, "If you have this in the 70s, you need to circle the whole kampung just to get change. That's how much RM50 used to worth back then," said Niew.

Of bellbottoms and afro-styled hair

By Song Sook Kin
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WHEN asked about her fashion style as a teenager back in the 70s, the first thing in Leong Mei Lan's mind was John Travolta's box-office film, *Saturday Night Fever*.

"The disco era influenced our fashion in so many ways. All the teenagers wore bell-bottom jeans. We called it the 'hala-hala' jeans," said Leong, 52.

Leong was reminiscing the time when the young Malaysian men would disco dance to Travolta and young women would exercise to VHS video tapes of Jane Fonda.

Leong also said the influence of John Travolta's "disco style" was so powerful that people were not only dressing like the actor but dancing like him as well.

"We didn't have iPads, iPhones or any of those fancy gadgets at that time. But we did have a lot of house parties where young people came together to socialise. It was called a 'house party' but there was never much food. All we did was dance like how Travolta did in the movie. We even had the big disco ball," she said, adding that at one point she even got her hair permed as it was 'cool' to do so.

At a time when race and religion was more of a personal thing, Leong said everybody wanted to get that "afro look".

There were not many wearing *tudung*

then and "perming" was the "in thing".

"When I finally permed my hair, it looked like there was a bee hive on my head. But, of course, no one laughed at me because they had the exact same dry and frizzy hair," she said.

The 70s also saw most young ladies wearing hot pants, mini-skirts, blouses with lots of frills and laces as well as high platform shoes.

"I used to wear blouses with huge shoulder pads. It was the trend at that time. They make your shoulders look bigger than normal but that appealed to us back then. Some of my friends also wore those blouses that expose part of your abdomen. It's supposedly sexy.

"One of the popular skirts was the 'bamboo skirt' which were made of pleats. We also wore platform shoes which we called 'clogs' but they are different from the ones we wear in the bathroom," said Leong.

She also recalled wearing shorts for Physical Education in school and there was no such thing as wearing long pants for sports.

"In those days, schools were not so strict about our attires. All the Chinese, Malay and Indian students wore shorts for P.E. It was a very common thing at that time. Our shorts were as short as they can get," said the mother of three.

Looking back, Song Siew Poh, 50, could



Leong is seen sporting permed hair while sitting next to partner, Song, at her family house. The hair perm or otherwise known as the 'bee hive' hair was a huge hit among young girls in the 70s.

only describe the style in the 70s and early 80s as "unusual".

"Like the girls, we were also into bell-bottom pants. Those jeans worked like a mop. My friend used to collect so much dust on his 'hala-hala' because he was short and had to drag his jeans across

the floor as he walked around. Back then, we didn't think it was troublesome or weird. We thought we were cool," said the technician, recalling that his idols were mostly musicians and actors like John Travolta, The Bee Gees and The Beatles.

What's more interesting, he said, was

purposefully scrubbing his jeans with a brush to make some parts look faded and torn.

"We wanted our jeans to have that 'seasoned' look. It was a very popular thing to do at that time. People were doing it on their Levi's and Anco jeans. I did it on some imitation jeans I bought at the pasar malam," he said, adding that he also wore tight boot-cut jeans which people at that time called the 'drainage pipe'.

Song said he would never forget how he used to love wearing shirts with long sleeves, suede shoes and high waisted pants.

"When we wear a shirt, we don't button all the way up. Apparently, showing off our bare chests was attractive. As for the shoes, we didn't call them suede. They were known as 'coffin-shaped shoes'. Once I bought a white pair but only wore it a couple of times before I chucked them in the closet. I couldn't stand those shoes. The colour was too glaring," he said, laughing.

Song recalled that fashion in those days meant everybody dressed the same regardless of race.

"We all had long hair. We all wore the same type of long-sleeved shirts. We loved the same type of music and most of the time owned a guitar. It didn't matter if you were a Malay, Indian or Chinese boy. Fashion wasn't so racially diverse as it is now," he said.