

An Interview with Mr Michael Ker

Mr Michael Ker - Recipient of the Stewards of Intangible Cultural Heritage Award 2020



Michael Ker

Image Credit: Michael Ker

Culture Academy	Congratulations on receiving the Stewards of Intangible Cultural Heritage Award! Please introduce yourself and your craft for our readers.
Michael Ker	Hi, my name is Michael Ker. I am the third-generation owner of Kway Guan Huat Joo Chiat Popiah. My family business has been making popiahs and kueh pie tees since 1938. We are famous for still making popiah skins the traditional way. It is a craft passed down from generations to generations.
Culture Academy	Could you elaborate on popiah's unique history in Singapore?
Michael Ker	Popiah is Singapore's favourite wrap. It is also a heritage food as Singaporean have them during certain festivals like Ching Ming and Chinese New Year. It is a tradition passed down from our forefathers. However, nowadays, popiah is enjoyed by all in Singapore
Culture Academy	Besides leaving with a fulfilled belly, what would the younger generation take away from their popiah encounters?
Michael Ker	That I am able to excite their curiosity about this humble and delicious food. To know the story behind popiah and the painstaking ways preparing them. I want to

	teach them how to wrap a good popiah and encourage them to make popiahs for their love ones.
Culture Academy	You've updated and retained the traditional practice of making popiah skins – a practice that takes years to perfect. What is your creative process?
Michael Ker	Making popiah skins is both an art and a science. When I practise my craft, I aim to understand more about its intricacies, therefore I push my ability to see if I am able to produce gluten free popiah skins, wholemeal popiah skins, etc.
Culture Academy	I understand that you recited a poem recently during the award ceremony, would you share the poem with us?
Michael Ker	It is a poem I wrote about intangible cultural heritage and what it means "A craft pass on from generation An enduring practice of tradition Never a capsule buried in isolation But a way of life and participation Family, club, society, association Culturally the tapestry of a nation"
Culture Academy	Is there something intangible in the skills acquired through making popiah by hand?
Michael Ker	In the future, machines will be replacing most of the work done by hand. Having said that I want to share a personal story. When people ask me who makes the most delicious popiah? I always say my mum. There is something ethereal about your parents or love ones making and wrapping the popiah for you even though you already knew all the secrets to preparing them. It just taste divine!
Culture Academy	You've brought popiah to a wider group of people, for instance through obtaining a Halal certification, as well as, bringing popiah to New York City in a pop-up event. How has expanding popiah to a wider audience shaped your thoughts on your craft?
Michael Ker	That people across the world find popiahs delicious and healthy. And when I prepare the dish right in front of them, they find it mesmerising! It just make me real proud that I am able to showcase our heritage food to the world
Culture Academy	What are your thoughts on Singapore's hawker culture being inscribed by UNESCO for its intangible cultural heritage?
Michael Ker	I am just so proud that we as a nation is able to achieve that. Indeed, our hawker culture is truly unique and very Singaporean. It is our way of living and what we do every day. A touching tribute to the hawkers especially those who practice their craft over decades.
Culture Academy	What do you think are the most important aspects of Singapore's hawker culture?

Michael Ker	The hawker is a person who honed his/her crafts through decades perfecting a single dish and usually is the sole breadwinner that brought up the whole family. It is also common to see the whole family chipping in to help during busy hours. The hawker centre is a place he/she work in. It is a no frills conglomeration of food stalls at one accessible location each offering their own specialty. To the public, the hawker centre has become a way of life sharing tables and ordering dishes from multiple stalls. Such a setup provides a truly unique Singaporean experience with all its dynamics, behaviours and intricacies.
Culture Academy	What does the term 'intangible culture' mean to you? And what are some aspects of Singapore's intangible culture that you value most?
Michael Ker	I would say it is knowledge/software we have in us which we try to pass on to the next generation about our existence.