Tradition, not profit, motivates

"Younger people think it is easy to just join and make money," says the father of three, who trained under a Taoist priest for five years before he started out on his own.

"With profit as the main motive, it's impossible to succeed in the funeral industry. You need to be able to take the long and stressful hours, be truly interested in proper rituals and helping the families of the deceased." Mr Shi used to handle 40 to 50 funerals a month, mostly referred to him by word of mouth, but has scaled back to about 30, as he feels he is getting on in years. He does not charge for his services, which include liaising with various vendors and providing advice on ritual matters, but accepts whatever the deceased's family gives him in the form of traditional red packets.

"The customer should be the one to put the price on how much your service is worth," says Mr Shi, adding that he just charges them the "cost price" of their chosen caskets and flowers.

With her stylishly coiffed red hair and iPhone glued to her ear, Madam Helen Ker embraces modernity, but relies on networking the old-school way for business.

The 53-year-old owner of Hao Ji Funerals shows up at many seventh-month charity dinners, bidding for auspicious auction items and meeting key members of the Chinese religious communities.

But her edge lies in her expertise in Chinese traditional rituals. She operates from a shop in Geylang Lorong 34 stocked with waxed paper umbrellas, dried food and offering papers.

"It takes years to learn the details of every ritual. I go to Malaysia every month to source for increasingly obsolete ceremonial products," says Madam Ker, who has been in the business for 15 years.

Her son Howard Kuo agrees with the importance she places on tradition. While he plans to expand the business by diversifying into Christian funerals, he thinks it will be a pity if the traditions are lost.

"After people like my mother leave the industry, it is likely that no one else will continue to supply such ritual items," says the 25-year-old, who is pursuing a degree in political science at a local university. "I hope the younger generation will learn the traditions before they die out."