

My Family' s WWII memories of Ipoh, Malaysia

By Jasemin (chinadaily.com.cn) Updated: 2015-09-02 16:24

I am a Chinese Malaysian, born in Ipoh, Malaysia in 1978 and am one of twins. Our Chinese names are Yi and Bao = YiBao (Ipoh). My mom named us such so that we will forever have Ipoh, the city in our hearts.

My maternal grandfather fled Zhongshan, Guangzhou during the Chinese Civil War and forged a new life in Ipoh. During that time, Ipoh was in a British Colony known as Malaya. A lot of Chinese migrants flocked to Ipoh to ride the tin mine boom which began in the 18th century. During Ipoh's peak, it was known as the City of Millionaires as demand for precious tin grew worldwide and exports exploded.

My late mother and her large family lived in a mansion close to the city. It accommodated dozens of people including my maternal grandfather Cheong Chee and his families. The compound could accommodate 100 cars I've been told. Cheong was one of the pioneers in Ipoh and was one of the successful Chinese migrants.



The author's mother during the 1960s. [Photo provided by Jasemin]

I've been told as well that during the Chinese Civil war, several Kuomintang supporters from Guangzhou fled China and sought refuge with my grandfather. I am not sure how true this tale is. However, we have evidence of some affiliation from a portrait which the late master Xu Beihong painted of my great grandmother. It was recently auctioned at Christie's in Hong Kong.

Peaceful Ipoh was disrupted in December 1941 when the Japanese invaded Peninsular Malaya. My mother and her entire family fled to hide in the thick of the Cameron Highlands jungle. They survived by eating shoots and leaves and my grandfather and some of his peers indirectly helped with resistance against the

Japanese by caring for displaced locals. I admire my late grandmother for her tenacity as I am not sure if I was in her position whether I could survive. It was also rumored that the Japanese used our mansion as an interrogation and torture center for locals who did not want to betray their own kind. It was a cruel and terrifying period. Local women dressed as men to prevent them from getting raped by Japanese soldiers.

When Japan surrendered, my mother and her family returned to the mansion. There were stories that on some nights they could hear ghostly sounds of people screaming in terror and the marching of soldiers' footsteps. I am not sure of its authenticity but Ipoh folk collectively despise the Japanese for what their predecessors did during the 1940s.

But the old days are over now and Fukuoka is one of the sister cities of Ipoh, and one of my former high school friends won a scholarship to embark on an exchange program to Fukuoka as part of a cultural exchange.



Portrait of Madam Cheng, the author's great grandmother at 92, painted by Xu Beihong in Ipoh. [Photo provided by Jasemin]

Even though memories of the atrocities carried out by the Japanese during World War II may never leave our minds, anger begets anger. The best thing to do is learn from that experience and ensure it never happens again. Our history books in Ipoh focused on Malaysian history and we were never taught to despise the Japanese or other invaders of our country, rather we were always taught the values of forgiveness, tolerance, mutual respect and harmony.

Those that lived through the brutal Japanese invasion harbor some sense of animosity towards the Japanese as a race. Rightly or wrongly, I cannot say. My grandmother never visited Japan so her only exposure to the Japanese was during the attack which painted her general perception of them as a whole.

During the war what she saw was cruelty, brutality and evil. But my view is that parents, educators and nurturers need to explain what happened during those times and what can be learned from it. Cultivate understanding and tolerance in a non-judgmental manner. Sincere apologies and reconciliation between all affected parties should be reached too.....for harmony.