

# Dulang Washer

as told by Ian Anderson

Dulang Washing was a female only role carried out by local women and girls of all races in Malaya. It required a licence from the local authority and in 1927 alone, 7,536 twelve-month permits for dulang washing were issued in the Kinta Valley. Each permit cost \$1.

Xiu Li, widow, mother and Dulang washer had to work hard to make ends meet, for she had three young children to care for and no husband. He had been killed in a mining accident some years before. For her, every day started at 5.00 a.m. when she would light up the firewood to boil water and cook porridge for herself and the children.



*A scene of lady dulang washer walking to the mines. Picture courtesy of www.ipohworld.org*

Breakfast was always a hurried meal as the children had to be washed, dressed and fed before she left for the tin mine just before dawn. Once the children were ready and had their packed lunches of left-over porridge, she would start to prepare for her backbreaking day at the mine as a dulang washer.

In the Kinta Valley mines, panning took place after the coolies had done their best to extract the tin from the earth and sand. However there was always a good proportion of tin left behind and here the women worked with their round wooden trays made from slices of a tree known as dulangs, which could last the washer a lifetime with twisted wire holding the cracks together when it split. The dulang was used to scoop up the earth, mixed with water and by careful swirling of the water the mud was swept away and the heavier tin ore remained.

Once as clean as they could get it, the ore was tipped into a tin pail/bucket. Panning for tin was an important source of income for many families in the Kinta Valley for it brought in the money to feed the family and they therefore became an important part of the economy. Licensed or not, especially during the times of recession, those who did not find employment in the mines would work the rivers of Perak. However, this was not popular with the landowners or government as this often caused major damage to the river banks where the finest ore was thought to be.

But now Xiu Li was ready. She was dressed as always in a black Samfoo with extra long sleeves, to protect her hands from sunburn, and a head-scarf. All worthy dulang washers tried to outdo one another with their scarves! The best scarf was the one that had the smallest opening in front of the face, achieved by placing a few layers of thin cardboard between the cloth when folded into a triangle. Placed on the head and the two ends tied under the chin in a knot made the hole as small as possible! That is why even though dulang washer girls worked long hours under the sun, they were still “bak sheet sheet” and “waart luet luet” (fair and smooth).

Then it was off to her destination, barefooted (few poor people had shoes before the war), with her trusty coolie hat, her dulang, a small tin pail, aluminium water container and a rattan basket, all loaded on a coolie pole over her shoulder.

Some 20 minutes later she reached the mine and the day's labour would begin. In the full heat of the sun, with trousers rolled up, she would continue until late afternoon, and then head for home to prepare the dinner for the family. Finally, with the children asleep, she would use a half coconut shell as a small dulang, hunched over a bucket or bowl of water to further refine the day's harvest of ore. The purer the product, the higher the price the tin ore would fetch. Thankfully when all was as pure as she could make it she would retire gratefully to bed - for there was another day tomorrow.

