



Storytellers' Street

by Ian Anderson

Close to the junction of Ipoh's Panglima Street and Teacher Street (Jalan Bijeh Timah) stands an old tree, nearby the Kinta River. But this is no ordinary tree, for if this longstanding native of Old Town could speak, it would tell you many stories – of ancient warriors, kings and emperors, of glorious legends of Chinese mythology and of world events that in many cases did not make the history books. For this is the tree that stood in Storytellers' Street for decades, at one time the most popular place for an evening of cheap entertainment.

It all started when a couple of educated Chinese realised that so many of Ipoh's immigrants were both poor and illiterate. A radio set was a luxury common only to the Towkays and Expatriates, newspapers, like the Times of Malaya, had very small circulations (and you had to be able to read), cinemas cost money and the Rediffusion service was not available in many homes and certainly not in the mining kongsis. Clearly there was an entertainment slot to fill.

So fill it they did. They set up packing

cases close to the tree, right on the spot that today holds an electricity sub-station – and they told stories by the light of Kerosene lamps. One narrated famous legends of China, while the other read from the day's newspaper or fictional novels. But nothing comes free and patrons of this enterprise, both adults and children, had to pay a few cents to listen. The admission fee for one included the use of low wooden stools placed around the speaker and the session started when the stools were full and a joss stick lit; when it burnt out it was time to pay again or leave. His competitor had no stools and you either brought your own or squatted on the dirt.

Nobody knows quite when it all began – maybe even before the first World War – but there are many Ipoh residents who remember it between the wars and thereafter and look back on it with a great deal of nostalgia. From the 1930's, Winkie Ho recalls standing well back behind the tree as "... if I got too close they would ask me to pay a few cents, something I could not afford." Another, Michael Ho, reminisces "Sometimes I would go

there on my Hercules bicycle, but as my allowance was only five one cent pieces a week I could not go too often." Yet another, from the 40's, "The stories were so good I would regularly be late for dinner and get a beating from my father."

It is said that the practice continued into the early 1950's (some say as late as 1955), but as life improved in post-war Ipoh, tin and rubber production picked up and movie distributors and cinema owners (like the Shaw Brothers) got their businesses going again and the storytellers' audiences dwindled.. At that stage one of the two men, famous for his clear voice and pronunciation, was employed as a broadcaster on one of the newly imported advertising loudspeaker vans that became so popular in Ipoh in the 1950's.

So today the tree stands alone and lives with its' memories, The storytellers have gone, along with Rediffusion, the Times of Malaya and the old cinemas. Now we have Astro, Multiplexes and WiFi. Will we be as nostalgic about these in years to come?