



The Great Migration

Final Part

by Ian Anderson

“When the legends die, the dreams end; there is no more greatness.”
- Tecumseh of the Shawnee

“Every cloud has a silver lining” says the old English proverb and the most memorable cloud that cast its shadow over Ipoh was on June 1st 1892 when 123 of the wooden houses and sheds, laid out in an almost random pattern to the west of the Kinta River, were burnt down. Labelled “The Great Fire of Ipoh” that was bad news indeed!

Legend of the Lanes

But for the Assistant Collector of Land Revenue, W. P. Hume and the District Engineer, Kinta, P. B. McGlashan, it was just the silver lining they needed, for it gave them the opportunity to plan and rebuild the crowded, insanitary and ramshackle Town into a place to be proud of. Thus Ipoh, which was soon to become the most important Tin Mining Town in the world, was regenerated with straight, wide (for then) streets and brick houses and shops.

But, mysteriously, the new layout included three narrow lanes with houses so close together that residents could easily carry out conversations across the lane from bedroom to bedroom. These curiosities were named Hale Lane, Panglima Lane (the narrowest) and Market Lane, but more locally as First, Second and Third Concubine Lanes respectively; named, it is said, after the 'second wives' or mistresses of the rich Chinese Towkays who kept them in luxury there. But legend has it that these lanes have a much murkier past than housing a few illicit lady friends. They were once a hotbed of vice - mainly brothels and opium dens, licensed by the government and managed on behalf of the profit-seeking mining Towkays, for the entertainment and eventual degradation of their coolies.

Imagine the scene. A gloomy narrow lane, lit by a single kerosene lamp in the centre, casting just enough light to allow the Chinese and Japanese 'girls' to be seen standing enticingly in some of the doorways, inviting the passing, weary coolies for a bit of fun downstairs, or a pipe of opium upstairs. How could a man resist such temptation after many weeks of toiling in the mines from dawn to dusk and with his salary of a few cents jingling in the pocket of his ragged trousers. For the younger ones it was "Girl first, Pipe second", but for those already addicted

with the sweetness and mystery of opium, the girls were of no interest. Their need was, to get back into that all-embracing, shadowy and painless existence that smoking opium provides.

So up the stairs they went, to be met with near darkness; just a suggestion of shadowy figures, each with a small lamp to heat the opium, lying on mats with heads on wooden "pillows". They were in a paradise of their own, far away from Ipoh, their aching muscles and the agony of the mines. Smoke from the many pipes fills the air with its pungent smell enhancing that urgent need for the newcomers to hand over their coins and join the others in their ecstasy. But first the cashier needed to see the colour of their money. That hurdle over and armed with their mat, pipe, lamp and little pot of opium they joined their fellows, wherever there was space, soon to enter the wonderful world of their dreams. All was well!

But was it? For remember that opium is addictive and ravages the body to a level where death becomes inevitable – often in the opium den. Then the unlucky proprietor has a corpse on his hands, dressed only in singlet and pants, and without identification or the means to pay for his burial. Clearly there is a need to dispose of the body as quickly as possible. So legend has it that it was the custom to simply open the window and drop the lifeless coolie into the lane below; the Sanitary Board workers gruesome task being to collect the remains in the morning and send them for a pauper's funeral. A neat and economic solution to the problem.

Thus the lanes continued fulfilling the needs of thousands of coolies until 1909 when New Town, developed by Towkay Yau Tet Shin, was opened; 300 shophouses

standing to the East of Kinta River on what had previously been mosquito-ridden padi fields and foul-smelling pig styes.

Understandably nobody felt the urge to live in such a place and New Town remained empty. But not for long, for as the story goes, the government had a neat solution, simply moving the prostitutes away from Old Town and licensing them to operate their trade in selected New Town premises. After a visit to one of these establishments a man needs to quench his other thirst and soon there were coffee shops springing up in New Town with their staff living upstairs. Other businesses followed. The government's problem was over.

But what happened to our lanes in Old Town? Well they became more respectable. Families, rich men's mistresses and small businesses moved in. Indeed there are still some third generation families still there, but there is evidence that some of the opium dens lingered on into the 1920's

for Michael Ho clearly remembers dropping into his neighbour's when he was about 5 to savour the smell of the opium smoke he enjoyed.

Today, if one visits the lanes, there is no sign of the spicy past that they are said to

share, but there is one final legend to tell. A walk along Second Concubine Lane reveals a number of collapsing buildings, several fenced off for rebuilding and a general state of disrepair, but above each entrance there is evidence that once there were plaques fixed there to confirm the buildings were insured against fire. The story tells us that, in the early days, should a fire break out and there was no plaque visible to the Fire Brigade when they arrived they would simply let the building burn as they would not get paid for their efforts. Can you believe that?

Such are the legends of the Lanes.

