

The First Japanese Invasion

The history of the disastrous defeat of the British and Commonwealth Armies by the Imperial Japanese Army in the 1941 invasion of Malaya is well documented by historians, but few people recognize the earlier Japanese invasion that for Ipoh started some 50 years before. It is at this point that most readers will question, “What invasion?”, but the facts are there for all to see.



c1921, Japanese Prostitutes Pay their Respects to their Departed, at the Japanese Cemetery, Ipoh



Okiku, Former Japanese Prostitute, Ipoh



Belfield Street Ipoh c1921. On the left can be seen the studio of photographer I. Itoh at No.101-103. This was one of the four Japanese photo studios, in Ipoh at the time. Another Japanese business in the vicinity was Tasaka's Hairdressing Saloon just two doors away at No. 97.

The Japanese community in Ipoh actually dates back to at least 1893 when it is recorded that a Japanese Pony Bus Service was launched in Ipoh. With two ponies this ran between Ipoh and Batu Gajah. In 1899 a passing cyclist made note of a Japanese dentist and a photographer, both in operation in Ipoh. By 1902 there was also a Japanese Doby Service covering the streets of Ipoh with laundry collection and delivery. At around the same time, due to the poor economic situation in Japan many young girls came to the Kinta Valley as prostitutes practicing the oldest profession and asking for nothing more than, “Enough to eat will do.” One such lady, born in 1899, was Okiku who came from her home near Hiroshima in 1916. First she plied her trade at Port Klang but later moved to Ipoh and lived with a Japanese photographer Furukawa, who was working with I. Itoh, “Artistic Photographer and Frame Maker”, at 101 Belfield Street. Itoh was just one of many of his countrymen who ran photography shops in Ipoh.

Soon other trades swelled the numbers and in 1921 a Japanese reporter, Shizuo, recorded that the Japanese businesses in Ipoh numbered 25 in all – four dentists, three sundry shops, four photo studios, one tailor, five barbers, two laundry shops and six hotels. He failed (perhaps deliberately) to record the 50 prostitutes in Ipoh's brothels and the two elderly women and one monk, who lived in the caves in Tambun.

Many of these businesses are documented and their names roll off the tongue like a Japanese Telephone Directory – Kamata Dentist, H Shimoyana's Dental Office and Satow Surgeon Dentist. T. Tasaka's Hairdressing Salon, and the photographers, namely Mikasa Photo Shop and Hinode Photographer. Like photographer I. Itoh these were all in the vicinity of Belfield Street/Station Road.

Not far away in Hale Street, Nara's Elite Art Studio advertised itself as "Japanese Portrait Artists" and "Photographers for Mines and Estates". At the same time, trading companies Yoshimura and Kontani Shoten occupied shophouses in Hugh Low Street. Then, at 71 Anderson Road stood the Japanese "Hotel de Oasis" which had a good reputation for the cleanliness of its establishment. However in December 1941 it suffered the fate of being bombed in error by its own air force.

With such large numbers of Japanese in Perak, it was inevitable that a Japanese Association would be formed. This became known as the Japanese Welfare Association which, in 1922, had 132 members. However, in the late 1930's the Japanese businesses in Ipoh suffered severely from the nationwide Chinese boycott of their goods. Many were forced to close shop. Furukawa the photographer became a laundryman and eventually moved

to Singapore leaving Okiku and one child behind and many others simply returned home.

On 24 November 1941 all known Japanese were rounded up, shipped to Singapore and put on the hospital ship Huso Maru, an official evacuation ship sent by the Japanese Government. When the Japanese invaded Malaya on 8 December 1941, all remaining known Japanese men were arrested and interned in local prisons. Then on 14 December, Japanese women were also arrested - in Ipoh about 50 of them - and lodged in three Japanese owned hotels in the town, under police guard.



c1902, The Japanese Doby in Club Road Ipoh

The following morning, two of the hotels were bombed by Japanese aircraft and several of the women were killed. Those left alive were transported to Batu Gajah prison. What happened to them thereafter is not known, but no doubt they were released when the invaders reached the prison.

But by 1941 the work of the first Japanese invasion was complete, with the Japanese Imperial Army holding detailed maps, information and photographs of Malaya, courtesy of the first invaders. Thus the 1941 invasion became much easier than it would have been without such documentation. The rest is history! Among the relics left by the early Japanese community here is the Japanese

cemetery at 18, Jalan Sungai Pari, Ipoh. The exact date of its opening is unknown but the earliest grave there is said to be dated 1892, and the year 1972 is etched on the tomb of the last burial that took place there.

In October 1967, the remains of some 100 Japanese buried at a cemetery in Taiping, which came into existence in 1910, were moved to Ipoh for reburial. Fifty-one of the names were members of the dreaded Kempeitai, the Japanese secret police, who died during the Second World War.



Belfield Street, Ipoh c1908. Sporting the Rising Sun are the premises of Hinode Photographer, located to the left of Hoot & Co.

The cemetery stands today as a memorial to that first Japanese invasion.



A British Army welfare officer interviews a Japanese prostitute c1932..