

OLD TOWN'S HERITAGE CORNER

By Ian Anderson

Over the past year or more the national media has glibly labelled it as Ipoh's Renaissance but in reality it is more of a series of economic renovations that has brought the crowds and inevitable traffic jams to Ipoh Old Town. New, trendy cafes, tourist shops, homestays and small hotels have sprung up in what were once shop houses, offices and workshops and they are all centered on, what for years has been the heart of Ipoh's tourism, Second Concubine Lane, (Lorong Panglima). However everything has a cost and many will say that the cost to Old Town has been a loss of character. Gone are many of the old facias to be replaced by steel shutters or modern doors, behind which there is a range of tourist trivia. Add to that candy floss and other popular confectionary stalls and you might as well be in a marketplace rather than those lanes and streets steeped in history and heritage. One wonders why our governing bodies allow such vandalism.

Dr Ho Kai Cheong,
the King of Herbal Tea
(D.D., D.C.S., FPN, PJK, PPM)



But thanks to ipohWorld (a company within Kinta Properties) and its sponsors there is some good news for heritage enthusiasts just across the road. We call it "Heritage Corner". Having opened the Hakka Museum, "Ipoh World at Han Chin Pet Soo" in February 2015, the ipohWorld team immediately embarked on the building next door (1 Jalan Bijeh Timah). The task was to restore the building to its original form and build an exhibition to honour the founder of that well known and well-loved Ho Yan Hor Herbal Tea. The exhibition successfully opened on 17 January 2016 and tells an extraordinary story about an amazing man.

The story of Ho Yan Hor starts in 1910 in a Malay village called Kati, in Perak, where young Ho Kai Cheong was born and grew up as the only Chinese boy there. His Cantonese father ran a coffee shop in Kuala Kangsar and young Ho started his education at Tsung Wah Chinese Primary School, but after two years his father sent him to Canton to gain a good Chinese education. Ho returned to Malaya and Kati at age 14, having completed his studies. Not cut out for a lifetime in the coffee shop he apprenticed himself to a Chinese Sensei, following his burning ambition, to be able to overcome the many health problems experienced by local people in those far-off days. He learned quickly and within three years he opened his own medical shop, "Weng Zhong Ho" in Kuala Kangsar.



However, there the medical career was terminated abruptly for China needed soldiers and so he followed the call of his motherland and joined the Kuomintang Army. The Japanese invaded China in 1937 and the following year his unit was overrun by the Japanese in Hunen. There was no option but to flee to Hong Kong and safety, for to stay would have meant certain death.

Once in Hong Kong, the old interest in Chinese medicine returned and he enrolled in the "Canton Wah Lam National Physician's School" from where he graduated in December 1940. He returned to Malaya, settling in Malim Nawar where he soon became a popular member of society and head of the security committee. He also experimented with health giving herbal medicines.

But luck was not on his side for soon after the Japanese invaded Malaya they pinpointed Malim Nawar as the ideal spot for a, mainly underground, ammunition factory. It did not take them long to establish that Ho Kai Cheong had fought against them in China. He was imprisoned, interrogated and probably tortured. Fortunately he was released, but terrified of further interrogation he fled to rural Perak and worked out the rest of the war as a Padi planter. It was there he married and had his first daughter. Great was the euphoria when the Japanese surrendered and Ho was able to return home. But there was no home, the house had gone and there were three mouths to feed. He was desperate and without the means to open a medical business he took a job in a local sundry shop.

Fortunately, he soon met a kind and helpful man, Yew Song Pak, who counselled Ho and persuaded him to follow his ambition. Encouraged, Ho moved to Ipoh at the end of 1945, and rented a room at 1 Treacher Street (Jalan Bijeh Timah). He, his wife and daughter only had four dollars between them! Thus started an entrepreneurial career that is nothing short of astounding.



Based on his earlier experiments with herbs Ho Kai Cheong brewed a pot of tea and from a small stall in front of the house he endeavoured to sell it at 5-cents per cup. Treacher Street was a vibrant area in those days and in one hour the teapot was empty! The following day he could afford more herbs and within a few days he was selling tea from 6.00pm to 10.00pm with a regular daily income of 60 to 70 dollars. Ho Yan Hor Herbal Tea had arrived!

Once started, Ho's ambitions had no limit and he invented a powdered tea and marketed it in paper sachets, the first person to do this in Malaya. Then, in 1947, with the desire to sell his tea farther afield he bought a bicycle and with as many packets of tea he could carry he cycled from Ipoh to the Cameron Highlands, Kuala Lumpur, Johor, Penang and almost to the Thai

border. Each trip could take three weeks or more and while he was away his wife made the tea and manned the tea stall nightly.

Such was the success of these operations that Ho Kai Cheong bought his first car in 1948, a Fordson commercial van in 1951 and a piece of land in Kuala Kangsar Road, Ipoh in

1953 to build his first factory. The rest as they say is history!

The Ho Yan Hor museum exhibition tells the complete story, with a wealth of photographs, from 1910 to the present day and focuses on the man himself. Dubbed "The King of Herbal Tea", he was nothing less than an educationalist, entrepreneur, philanthropist, marketing genius, master calligrapher, talented artist, family man, university graduate at age 87 and most of all a man who cared deeply for the health and well-being of all his fellow men.

It is a wonderful slice of Ipoh's history and the museum is open to visitors daily (except Monday) from 10.00am to 4.00pm. Entrance is free and you will be able to taste the famous health-giving tea. Why not pop along? You will enjoy it.