

Malaysia: Heart and Soul: Enduring hardships bravely

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Every day, father woke up early to prepare his food before he went out to work.

He had to ensure that he complied with the strict rations and restrictions imposed by the British Colonial authorities in the San Chun (Chinese new village). Everyone was allowed to carry only a small amount of rice and other food items with them. Even basic items like salt and sugar were strictly controlled. There were severe penalties for those who did not comply. As his work involved heavy labour, the little food he carried with him each day was never enough. Often, he had to go to the nearby forest to rummage for bananas, mangoes or jackfruit. Occasionally, there would be a bonanza when he came across a durian or two.

During the Emergency, the villagers often had to face the wrath of the armed guards in the village over some minor misdemeanours. Occasionally, father was scolded by the guards when they felt that they were not being greeted properly. However, to be fair, father said that they were still better than the Japanese soldiers who punched and kicked him during the Japanese Occupation. The armed guards at his village assaulted him verbally but not physically.

The villagers must have by now gotten used to being abused on a daily basis by the British authorities and their local policemen. They had become desensitised to this form of daily abuse. Fear and tension were written all over the faces of the villagers each time they were searched when they passed through the gates of their village. The women, especially, had to endure the rough physical handling by the male armed guards as they laid their hands on their bodies while insulting their modesty.

My aunts recalled that their hair would stand on ends whenever they passed through the gates of the exit. Some even likened it to the gates of hell. In Chinese mythology, the gates of hell are guarded by Ngao Tao Ma Mein (figures that have the body of a man but an ox head or horse face). They are the sheriffs of the underworld. Whenever, my young aunts saw the male armed guards, they would imagine them to be Ngao Tai Ma Mien. To my young aunts, these guards might have the head but not the heart of a human. They often wondered aloud why the male guards would lower themselves to such a level of inhumanity!

Even though their consciences were clear, the innocent villagers were worried that the guards might find something that they might have overlooked earlier. They were all fearful of the dire consequences if they were caught for one reason or another.

To ensure a smooth and quick passage through the gates of the village, father told me of how some villagers bribed the armed guards with their produce. During their harvest, they would give some fruits or a chicken to the guards occasionally.

Besides the daily body searches at the exit gates, the armed guards and policemen would also come to check on the villagers in their homes on any day and at any time. They would come fully armed

with their guard dogs barking ferociously. They would bang hard on the front doors and shout at the villagers. The little wooden attap-roofed houses of the villagers had rickety wooden doors and flimsy structures. So, quite literally, their little wooden houses would shake. And the villagers would be trembling with fear.

Father related how the villagers were subjected to humiliating and demeaning searches and punishment on the mere basis of suspicion. There were instances when the villagers were forced to stand outside their houses for hours under the hot sun. As the wooden houses were small and there was no way anyone could hide in them, the searches conducted should not have taken more than a few minutes. Hence, the only logical reason was for the British authorities to punish the innocent villagers despite being unable to find anything incriminating.

Perhaps the pure innocence of the villagers made the authorities even more cross with them as it proved their suspicion wrong. Perhaps this exposed the true state of the heart of the British authorities when they boasted about winning the hearts and minds of the people.

Father told me that the villagers were not afraid of the hot punishing sun. They were more afraid that the authorities might plant some evidence in their rooms or under their beds. He heard of someone being taken away under such a pretext and was never seen again. Perhaps this was the way the authorities instilled fear and discipline in the village

More than a concentration camp, the San Chun was like a prisoner of war (PoW) camp. Besides the imposing physical dominance of the double- or triple-barbed wires and watchtower with armed guards and guard dogs, the various rules and regimens practised were deliberately aimed at imposing total control over the villagers' minds and bodies.

The poor villagers had to grit their teeth and bear with all the indignities and injustices, however insufferable they might be. Each day brought with it so many anxieties and uncertainties. Just as during the war, they had to survive one day at a time.

The fortitude and tenacity that saw them through all the atrocities under the Japanese Occupation earlier on helped them to endure all the injustices of living in the San Chun.

Father often reminded me of the importance of resilience and indomitability of the human spirit as he said: *Jo yan sik foo bok maeng* (Cantonese phrase meaning to swallow the bitterness and be gritty).

If we want to live, we had to do just that. Indeed, life was bitter for the villagers. They had to spend nearly a lifetime of enduring the hardships. In the end, their gritty and gutsy spirit helped them to overcome all the challenges and deprivations both during the war and the Emergency period.

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