

## Tribute to war martyrs

Eighteen freedom fighters who were killed by the Japanese 60 years ago were finally interned in a proper grave, writes MAJORIE CHIEW.

On the morning of Nov 11, a group of people invaded the undergrowth somewhere in Sungai Tua, Batu Caves, in Selangor. They were not jungle trekkers but had gathered at the site of a mass grave that man and time forgot. It was the grave of 18 anti-Japanese martyrs who died as freedom fighters some 60 years ago.

The group including the Press as well as television camera crew had swarmed this place to record history for posterity.

The highlight of the day was the digging up of the remains of these heroes, mostly members of the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army, and relocating them to Nilai Memorial Park in Negri Sembilan, the first modern memorial park conceptualized on traditional Chinese values in Malaysia.

Not many people knew of this grave tucked away from human settlements. But two years ago, some people approached MCA Gombak Division for help "to do something about the grave" in Malay reserve land earmarked for development.

Liew Yew Kiew, 89, formerly a villager of Sungai Tua, informed Quek Jin Teck, then secretary-general of the Malaysian Chinese Cultural Society, of the latest news.

As a result, the 9-1 Memorial Committee was set up. It comprises representatives from 22 Chinese associations and Xiao En Cultural Endowment, a charity organisation set up by the Xiao En Group (formerly the Nilai Memorial Group) that operates Nilai Memorial Park.

The committee's main aim was to relocate the remains of these martyrs. The Xiao En Group had set aside land worth over RM1mil which includes the new site for the remains and the proposed Malayan Anti-Japanese Martyrs' Monument and Anti-Japanese Martyrs' Museum.

After the upcoming Chinese New Year, there are plans to raise funds for the proposed projects.

Quek, who heads the 9-1 Memorial Committee, also wrote the book, Mysterious Wright (in Chinese) exposing the traitor, Loi Tak @ Lye Tek @ Wright @ Lloyd, the top political and military commander of Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA) and secretary-general of the Malayan Communist Party. Dubbed "the Lenin of Malaya", this double agent from Vietnam betrayed his comrades in the Sept 1 incident.

Quek interviewed Liew and went to Guangzhou, China, to talk to Liew's elder brother, Yew Soong, while researching for his book which was published four years ago.

"There were neither skeletal finds nor remnants of clothing at the mass grave. Instead, the earth wherein the remains had disintegrated was collected in special urns," said Ong Seng Huat, chief executive director of Xiao En Cultural.

In all, there were 18 ceramic urns for "the remains". Three hearses, each bearing six urns, then headed for the new burial site in Nilai Memorial Park.

"The urns had four white-lion head motifs representative of warriors while the red ribbon and 'gold flowers' were a tribute to the martyrs. Yellow chrysanthemums were symbolic of loyalty and the fight for principles," said Ong. Pewter name plaques in memory of the martyrs were placed in the urns.

Over 100 guests turned up at the relocation of remains ceremony held in Nilai Memorial Park.

Some 18 representatives from various Chinese associations tied a red ribbon around each urn and stuck two gold flowers, as a tribute to these heroes, in a special ceremony to honour and remember them.

Five Hakka Taoist priests in red robes conducted prayers, after which the urns were lowered into a brick chamber for burial.

Datuk Tan Chai Ho, Deputy Minister of Energy, Communications & Multimedia, took part in the ceremony together with Chinese association leaders and Datin Choo Lein Seik Keng, chairman of the Xiao En Group.

The martyrs, many of whom were leaders of the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army, were believed to be among a group of 30 who had gathered for a central committee meeting in a hut in Sungai Tua. About 4am on Sept 1, 1942, Japanese soldiers ambushed them.

The relocation ceremony was to remember these patriots who died for the country. Said Tan: "We want to let the younger generation know that the 18 mart's were heroes. Their sacrifices showed they were patriots who fought for the country. Such nationalistic attitude should be emulated."

"We also want to convey the message that peace is so important so that people can live harmoniously in a country. Also, we want to instill semangat cintakan negara (patriotism) amongst us."

Ong said: "These 18 heroes managed to escape from the clutches of the enemy

but they chose to return to fight for their cause and help their comrades to escape. They sacrificed their lives in fighting to their last bullets.” At that time, the slogan of MPAJA members was “anti-Japanese to protect Malaya”. He added that the identity of the traitor was only found out in 1946.

Chong Yoon Foo, project coordinator of Xiao En Cultural, said the 18 MPAJA members were Lee Cheen Choong alias Siow Choong, Chu Ler Kwong, See Ching Piaw, Chen Soo, Yee Hoong, Cheong Kee Sang, Choong Chen Kang, Chen Fan Siong, Wen Yen, Ah Yen, Wang Kwong. Pao Loon, Siow Lin. LiewYew, PangYu, Liew San Nai, Liew Koon and Chang Kwan Foong.

“The 9-1 Memorial Committee wishes to express that the relocation exercise was not to incite feelings of hatred or to seek revenge or confrontation with the Japanese.”

“It is to inform the present and future generations about the past sacrifices, lessons and experiences in history. They should also know about our ancestors’ struggles in protecting the country to ensure peace and stability.”

He said the committee felt that “we can forgive (the Japanese) but cannot forget the (unfortunate) incidents.”

Liew Yew Kiew, now a farmer in Jinjang North, led the group to the mass grave marked by a head stone. Workers had cleared the area a few days ahead.

“When he first showed me the grave, he used a parang to clear the path in the thick undergrowth,” said Quek at the office of Xiao En Cultural in Petaling Jaya. He and Liew had turned up for an interview with Section 2 recently.

Quek later flipped the pages of his book to show the black-and-white photographs of the mass grave and memorial tablet of the martyrs.

Did anyone, particularly the villagers, ever visit the grave? I asked in Hakka. With a laugh, he replied in his native Hor Poh Hakka: “Some punters had prayed at the grave and asked for (four-digit) lottery numbers.”

On the missing 9-1 memorial tablet, Liew said: “The stone tablet (located on the top of a slope) was broken into two. Some people retrieved it and took it to Sungai Buluh to mend. It would be brought back to Nilai Memorial Park later on.”

During the massacre, Liew was amongst 30 villagers rounded up for interrogation. “The Japanese Army detained us for a week for questioning. For our once-a-day meal rations, we had to receive it in cupped hands. The food consisted of rice, cucumber skin and kangkung roots. Although it was unappetising, we had to eat it or starve,” he said.

“Some illiterate villagers were slapped when they could not even write their names or seemed afraid of the Japanese during interrogation.”

Earlier, when met at the ceremony for the relocation of the remains, Liew told The Star that he knew four of the 18 martyrs who were decapitated.

“Their heads were placed at a roundabout in Jalan Ampang (in Kuala Lumpur) to serve as a warning to any-one who opposed the Japanese,” he recounted, the memories still vivid despite his age.

After the massacre, the headless bodies of the 18 were buried in a mass grave. He could not give details as to whether they were buried in a coffin, as he did not witness the burial.

He added: “They were buried by some Indians as the Chinese were too scared. In those days, Sungai Tua had two main groups of settlers - the Chinese, who were Hor Poh Hakkas, on one side of the river and the Indian community on the other side.”

“However, the heads of the martyrs were taken for burial at Kwang Tung Cemetery, Kuala Lumpur, after the gruesome display for a week.”

“I am glad for this day when their acts of courage and patriotism are remembered,” said Liew who recently joined others in paying their respects to the 18 fallen heroes. They laid fresh stalks and wreaths of yellow chrysanthemums on the new tomb, a befitting resting place.