

The Pre-War Japanese Community in Penang (1890~1940)

Clement Liang

One of the significant minorities who made their presence in Penang from the late 19th to early 20th centuries came from Japan. In 1910, the official census counted 207 Japanese residents in Penang alone. Unlike the present day Japanese expatriates living in Penang, those early-day Japanese settlers were much poorer in comparison and in fact more than half of the Japanese residents then were involved in the “flesh” trade.

No of registered Japanese residents in Penang as at end of December 1910

Occupation	No of business establishment	No of male Staff	No of female staff	Combined total
Medical Clinic	1	2	1	3
Dentistry	1	3	0	3
Photo Studio	1	7	2	9
Glass & Mirror	1	2	0	2
Groceries	2	2	4	6
Pharmacies	2	2	1	3
Hotels & Inns	2	6	4	10
Motion Picture	2	20	3	23
Hairdressing	1	2	1	3
Foundry	1	0	1	1
Poultry Farm	1	1	1	2
Rubber Plantation	1	1	1	2
Buddhist Clergy	2	2	1	3
Laundry	1	2	1	3
Carpentry	2	2	2	4
Prostitution	28	4	126	130
	49	58	149	207

Source: Overseas Japanese population census by the Acting Consul of Japan in Singapore, Mr. Iwatani (1910)

The early Japanese in Penang

Karayuki-san

The History of Karayuki-san (overseas Japanese prostitutes). The Shimabara Peninsula, which is located in Nagasaki Prefecture, and the arid mountainous Amakusa islands, which lie opposite the Kumanoto. Prefecture in Kyushu produced the highest numbers of Karayuki-san. These fishing and farming areas in Kyushu were among the most impoverished areas in Japan due to the lack of fertile land for cultivation, the burgeoning population and a tacit punishment for started a massive rebellion against the authorities. During the Tokugawa period, the peasants of Amakusa and Shimabara had to pay up to 50% of their harvest to the Daimyo (feudal lord) or the Bakufu feudal authorities as a form of land tax. During the Meiji era, which began from 1868, the conditions of the peasants did not improve much as they continued to be forced to contribute the same rate of taxes in the form of cash.

Since these areas are close to the seaport of Nagasaki which has good connection to travel to the Asian continent and S.E. Asia, the peasants and fishermen who were poverty stricken and facing the threat of long-term famine had little choice but under the persuasion of the prostitute racketeers called Zegen, to sell their daughters to work as Karayuki-san or prostitutes overseas. (Note: Karayuki means one who went to China).

Despite the difficult lives many of the Karayuki-san led abroad, they were often stalwart patriots who sent money back home to support both their impoverished families. The money which these Karayuki-san remitted back to their homeland contributed a large foreign reserve to the Japan's economy at that time. During the Japan's expansionist wars in Qing Dynasty China in the mid 1890's and Czarist Russia in 1905, the brothel owners used the idea of national good to enslave the young girls and women who were told that their bodies belonged to the state and that they constituted a form of female army.

The victory over the Russians in 1905 saw an up surge of nationalism and racial pride in Japan and by 1910, the voice of abolishing this disgraceful overseas "flesh" trade began to be heard from the overseas Japanese community leaders and Japanese officers traveling abroad.

However, it was not until 1920 that Japanese Government, in collaboration with the British administrators who was concerned about the epidemic spread of the venereal diseases, began to abolish this "flesh" trade and forced the Karayuki-san to leave the Straits Settlements and the Malay states. Most of them were

sent back to Japan for good and for those who refused to do so, they either went “under-ground”, married the locals or tried their luck in the major cities of China.

Doctors, Dentists and Pharmacies

The Karayuki-san’s local activities generated a “spillover” economy which brought prosperity to those who cash in to cater these girls' special needs. One phenomenon was the presence of a small number of medical practitioners e.g. doctors, dentists and pharmacists who provided health care service to these girls. Being westernised in outlook and charging less than the Europeans, they were welcomed and patronised by the locals.

Photo Studios and Silent Movie Theatres

Japan was the first country in the East that became industrialised through its national campaign to be westernized during the Meiji Restoration period (1868 - 1912). Western inventions and ideas were quickly picked up by the Japanese and it in turn reintroduced to other Asian countries.

The Japanese brought in the cameras and introduced the photo studio to Penang. At the turn of the 20th century, it was known that a Japanese by the name of Okaniwa had already operated a photo studio at Leith Street. The Japanese were also among the first groups to bring in the silent movies to the Penang viewers.

Hoteliers & Inns Keepers

The Japanese operated several hotels in Penang along Chulia St. and Campbell St. The early ones probably started in the early 20th century were mainly catered for the Karayuki-san’s “business” but when the ocean-liners became the mode of travel between Japan and Europe from 1920s, the Port of Penang became one of the main stops for the Japanese ocean-liners en-route to and from Europe. Better hotels like the Asahi Hotel at 22, Transfer Road was established to cater the needs of more sophisticated Japanese customers.

The Little Japan at Cintra Street & Kampung Malabar

The Chinese in Penang call Cintra Street as Jipun Kay & Jipun Heng Kay - the Little Japan Street and the nearby Kampung Malabar as Jipun Sin Lo-the Japanese New Road. A reference to the presence of a sizeable Japanese community operating brothels, grocery shops, pharmacies, hotels in that area at the turn of the century. In 1915, the Japanese Association was officially set up in Penang to take care of their communal affairs. The building location could still be located be in an old wooden bungalow nicknamed Jipuna Kong Kwan presently situated in between Kampung Malabar and Chulia Street.

The Penang Japanese Cemetery

The Japanese Cemetery situated at Jalan P. Ramlee was set up on 2.10.1893 with 4 trustees (Yamada, Maroree, Hashee Mawthaw, Hamanaka) being granted the title deed by the Land Office. The cemetery was left in neglected state for many years. In 1965, a long time Japanese resident in Penang, Mr. Hirajima entrusted by the Japanese Embassy to clean up the cemetery. For his effort, he was awarded medal by the Japan Foreign Ministry in 1978.

There were 56 tombstones found in this cemetery with the earliest one dated back to 1893 (Meiji 26th Year). Contrary to popular belief, this cemetery is not a burial ground for the Japanese soldiers killed during the Second World War. In fact, only one tombstone dated 30.7.1942 belonging to one Kataoka from Troop 5174, All the other 55 tombs are dated between 1893 - 1926. The majority of the Japanese who were buried or commemorated here consist mostly the Karayuki-san who died during the Meiji Period (1868 - 1911) and a number of Japanese Navy officers who died in the seaways near Penang during the Taisho Period (1912-1925).

Evacuation of the Japanese Residents

Ever since a large number of Karayuki-san returned to Japan in 1920, the number of long-term Japanese residents in Penang reduced significantly but the number soon recovered by other professionals who came in. In 1925, the Japanese population in Penang stood at 166.

In the 1930s, the Japanese invasion of Manchuria and China sparked a series of anti-Japanese campaigns by the Chinese community in Malaya. In 1935, the Japanese Club in Singapore was ransacked by about 200 Chinese rioters. In Penang, in-line with the anti-Japanese campaigns in China, Chinese leaders actively instigated the people to boycott Japanese goods and services. In 1937, sensing the tense and dangerous situation, the Japanese wives and children living in Malaya & Singapore were tacitly advised to evacuate and return to Japan by their authorities and the community leaders and this evacuation intensified just before the War in 1941. The Chinese had long suspected all the local Japanese were spies for the Imperial Japanese government but only a handful of Japanese residents that remained behind were true collaborators to the Japanese invaders. During the War, the main informants were the Chinese merchants who traded Japanese goods before, the Taiwanese who could speak both Hokkien & Japanese and the Chinese police inspectors who pleaded their allegiance to the new master.

Some shops operated by the Japanese just before the war included a dental clinic owned by Mitsutake family at the junction of Muntri St. and Leith St. a crockery shop named Nagoya sitting beside the Odeon Theatre and a toy shop in the Tong Aik Building at the corner of Hutton Lane and Penang Road. The Asahi

Hotel at Transfer Road was an officially appointed hotel by the Japanese Government and it was suspected being used as a base for the Japanese espionage activities in this region.

Conclusion

The Japanese residents in the old days of Penang formed a vibrant community providing entertainment, western-style medical care, hotel services, skilled labour and brought in the latest technology for portrait photography & silent movie to Penang at a time where the society was made up of a predominantly male migrant force. Like many other new immigrants, the Japanese came here to look for better life but suffered various forms of discrimination including racist assaults from the Chinese extremist groups. For those involved in the flesh trade, many were treated like commodities, transported from town to town by the pimp racketeers.

Compared to the present day Japanese expatriate community in Penang, the early days Japanese settlers had more interactions with the locals at the grass root level. It is important that these Japanese being recognised as one of the ethnic groups that had made significant contributions to Penang's early development and their role should not be mixed up with the Japanese military invaders who came later with a totally different intention. It is an undeniable fact that the Japanese have left an indelible mark on Penang's history and their culture had woven into the social fabric of Penang in those days.

References:

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