

Malaysia: Heart and Soul: Paradise or concentration camp?

Tuesday 9 August 2022, by [LOONG Gary Lit Ying](#) (Date first published: 26 January 2022).

Father cringed at the way the British blatantly manipulated the facts. For instance, the colonial government attempted to portray the new villages as a paradise with modern facilities such as piped water and electricity.

It also boasted of a central kitchen which provided cooked food for the villagers.

It also claimed that the villagers were happily settled in the villages. However, according to father, these claims were far from the truth.

The central kitchen provided free food only in name. The reality was that the food given was never really enough for everyone in the family. Often, the parents had to go hungry in order to feed their children. In many homes, the tired and hardworking parents ignored their own hunger pangs. In the still of the night, the growling of their hungry stomachs could be heard through the thin bamboo walls separating the houses.

The central kitchen facility was an attempt to control the villagers. The denial of food led to poor nutrition and sickness, such as gastric ulcers, among many villagers – this affected their health and productivity later in life. This could well be the reason why my father developed gastric ulcers at an early age.

The villagers constantly lived in fear of their British colonial master and their local armed guards. The strict control of food and movement of people applied even to personal celebrations such as weddings. The family concerned had to provide a list of food (and state the quantities) as well as the guest list. All the guests had to be searched by the police and register with their ICs at the entrance, before they were allowed to enter.

On some occasions, the bride and bridegroom were harassed by security forces. They were suspected to be communist sympathisers and detained for possessing “communist materials”, namely, the red cloth that hung over the main door. In actual fact, it was a traditional Chinese custom to hang a red cloth over the main door during the wedding period.

It was ironic that the British authorities declared the areas with communist activities as “black” and yet banned “red” banners. Some villagers refused to call them “black” areas, preferring to call them “red” areas. According to feng shui, black denotes a bad omen while red signifies good luck.

It's an illustration of how the colonial British attempted to manipulate the use of language in order to influence the minds of the people. But their clumsy attempt backfired as it created an unforeseen controversy.

Aside from some model villages that were supplied with piped water and electricity, many others had no piped water at all. The villagers had to resort to digging wells for their own use – sometimes,

the well water was muddy and unusable. In some villages, the people needed to use a river nearby. Some were bitten by snakes and giant fishes, or attacked by crocodiles.

Many of the houses in the new villages did not have proper toilets and had to share a common toilet, which was a long walk away. Some of them were bitten by cobras while using the toilet at night.

At times, in their hurry to go to the toilet in the middle of the night, some villagers were even shot and killed, father heard. It's tragic that these extreme control measures led to the suffering, and sometimes even death, of the innocent villagers.

Due to all these restrictions, some villagers suffered from poor health and malnutrition. When they fell sick, the curfews made it quite hard for them to seek immediate medical attention.

Nobody liked to be subjected to the restrictions of daily curfews and body searches. They lived in fear.

For many of them, the identification parade in front of the armoured car brought back the haunting memories of Sook Ching ("cleansing") that took place during the war. It re-opened their old emotional wounds and psychological scars. It brought excruciating pain to them.

Under such trying circumstances, the villagers had to learn to navigate and negotiate to survive. There was a time the British authorities told some village heads to show their loyalty to the government by organising a rally to denounce Chin Peng and his communist guerrilla fighters.

So the villagers put on a staged show when a high-ranking colonial British officer, with his entourage of assistants and journalists, came to their village. They painted effigies of Chin Peng and happily set a bonfire to burn them in the presence of the colonial officer and the journalists.

The next day, the colonial government-controlled newspapers boasted that the people in the new villages were staunchly anti-Communists and supportive of the colonial government's campaign.

Having suitably impressed the British, the authorities relaxed their surveillance measures. This actually allowed the villagers to smuggle more food to the communist guerrillas. This was the villagers' way of navigating and negotiating the challenging demands of living in the new villages. They had to "dance" between the two masters: the British authorities and the communist guerrillas. They could not afford to offend either one.

They were the hapless and unwitting victims caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. All they really wanted was to be left alone to carry on with their lives.

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