

Ipoh – my hometown

“Ipoh!” is my enthusiastic reply whenever people ask me where my hometown is. I was born in the 1980s and grew up with relatives on my mother’s side. She had 10 siblings and I had 20 cousins. My grandfather started a leather business in a shophouse on Hugh Low Street (Ipoh town centre), followed by a textile-retailing business with my uncles. Three generations of my family lived on the first floor of the shophouse. I thought it was very common to live in shophouses — until I met friends in school. Then I realised there was something called a “garden” — that is, housing areas, urban extensions of the town centre. The terminology is commonly used among Ipohrians to indicate which housing areas they live in. Well, in the mid-1990s, my family moved to one of the gardens too!

Ipoh town centre (which consists of the Old and New towns) was once a very busy business district, with businesses ranging from retailers, eateries (kopitiam), Western clinics, traditional Chinese medicine shops, pawnbrokers, jewellery shops and makers of handicraft, such as rotan furniture, clogs, blinds and lion heads. There were three prominent landmarks — namely Pasar Besar (central fresh market), Perak Emporium and Super Kinta (both were



BY
Dr Teh Pek Yen

School of Hospitality
and Service
Management

Sunway University

air-conditioned departmental stores and my favourite places to buy toys!). The vibrancy of Ipoh in those days is attributable to the development of the tin mining industry. I remember Ipoh for its medley of Western (British) and Eastern (Chinese migrants) cultures.

The demise of tin mining made Ipoh something of a backwater. However, this changed with the advent of tourism, especially domestic, in recent decades.

Ipoh is now a food paradise. Unfortunately, I have some concerns about the current situation. It seems that the town’s heritage has been replaced by a greater focus on white coffee and food. Tourists who visit the Old Town to view the murals in Concubine Lane may not be fully aware of its history.

There are few relevant sociocultural values that project the identity of Ipoh, such as tin mining and the Chinese migrants. This is not a good sign for the sustainability of the tourism industry.

Many people have the wrong perception that sustainable tourism is all about environmental issues. In fact, sustainable tourism practices also include sociocultural and economic aspects. The sociocultural aspect is the most vulnerable among the three and is always omitted, especially

intangible attributes such as language, arts and crafts, custom and lifestyle, and beliefs and values.

Unlike the environmental and economic aspects, the sociocultural aspect of a place can showcase its identity. When tourists want to travel, the unique identity of a place can attract them sufficiently to select it as a destination above others. For instance, in Vietnam, you would definitely want to experience the coffee culture while perched on a plastic stool by the roadside.

Meanwhile, some of the sociocultural experiences may be re-presented in other forms, such as souvenirs. You may perhaps want to buy a pair of klompen when you visit the Netherlands. These traditional wooden clogs were used by farmers, fishermen and traders, but have now found new life as souvenirs.

The same concept could be also applied in Ipoh, focusing on its important tin-mining heritage and the influence of Chinese migrants. For instance, the Hainanese clan was associated with the Hainanese kopitiam, whereas tin mining was largely a Hakka preserve. Through this change of focus, the original cultural values of Ipoh can be presented to tourists and improve its unique selling proposition. **E**