

Museums: Guardians of History and Agents of Change

Social change occurs over time, sometimes gradually, sometimes very rapidly, as in Singapore over the last 48 years. People as well as things are agents of change and for this series of articles we chose iconic people and artefacts to exemplify social change, not just in this island nation, but also in the wider world. Singapore's icons of change were men such as Lim Boon Keng, a doctor, banker and social reformer, and Zubir Said, prolific composer and musician and creator of Singapore's national anthem. Kua Geok Choo (the late Mrs Lee Kuan Yew) represents the liberated Peranakan woman. She was an outstanding scholar and highly qualified lawyer who became an instrument of change for the status of women in Singapore.

Reflecting the change in the urban landscape is an article about Singapore's approach to public housing – the work of the Housing and Development Board (HDB). Today over 80% of Singaporeans live in HDB apartments and most are now privately owned. One area where change has been nearly as rapid as in Singapore's cityscape is that of the arts and culture. An almost barren landscape to begin with, today's Singapore is an arts hub with a lively and growing culture of exploring the limits of imagination. Two modern artworks exemplify this development: a contemporary sculpture examines social change resulting from the HDB's housing policies and performance art examines Singapore's growing openness to personal artistic expression.

Three articles comment on the power of words and printing: the Qur'an transformed disparate tribes into a single group of believers; the printing press at the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall enabled news from China to be disseminated across Southeast Asia; and print-making reveals the role that prints have always played, sharing information, opinion and inspiring action.

Lim Boon Keng – An Advocate for Social Change

By Elaine Cheong

When driving past the Singapore Chinese Girls' School I often wonder what Lim Boon Keng would think of the girls in their sleeveless sky-blue uniforms, a departure from the *baju panjang* (long-sleeved blouse) worn at the turn of the 20th century, and of the vast opportunities awaiting these girls on leaving school. It was Lim Boon Keng and Song Ong Siang who in 1899, founded the Singapore Chinese Girls' School with seven Straits-Chinese girls and an English headmistress, amid great opposition from Peranakan elders. As Lim Boon Keng explained, society would be held back if half its members were not educated. As a beneficiary of educational opportunities and also as Singapore's first recipient of the Queen's Scholarship, he appreciated the value of education as a tool for bringing about improvements in society. His work was not confined to Singapore.

In 1921, he accepted the position of President of Amoy (now Xiamen) University, at the behest of its founder, Tan Kah Kee. Lim spent 16 years there, leaving friends and thriving businesses in Singapore. His ideals and resolve for social and political reform underpinned his challenging tenure. The challenges arose from a difference in philosophies; he was a traditionalist and held Confucian values. After the May Fourth Movement of 1919, the university's students and staff were all ardent reformists. As a fitting tribute, his statue stands in the university grounds.

The Port City section of the History Gallery in the National Museum of Singapore showcases Lim Boon Keng's portrait and the environment he lived in. In 1893, dressed in a white suit, he qualified as a medical doctor in Edinburgh and returned to Singapore determined to improve the lot of the many men who lived in squalid conditions. When we walk in Chinatown today, it is hard to picture the overcrowding and misery Lim Boon Keng saw then. He started his first clinic, the Kiu Su Tong Dispensary, in Telok Ayer Street and went on



Lim Boon Keng and the Port City

to raise funds to establish the King Edward VII Medical College, the forerunner of the NUS Medical School. During 1916, he gave lectures on Pharmacology and Therapeutics in the college.

Lim Boon Keng not only blazed a trail in education and health care, he also played a large role in the politics of the day by crusading against Manchu rule in China. He wrote *The Chinese Crisis from Within*, a book which talks about his understanding and support of China's reform movements and his philosophy on reform without bloodshed. What happened in China affected Chinese society in Singapore and Malaya. In August 1895, he replaced Seah Liang Seah and was

the lone Chinese member of the Legislative Council, where he served for 10 years and was re-appointed in 1915. Lim played a significant role in introducing Dr Sun Yat Sen to Tan Kah Kee, the millionaire businessman and patriot. Massive financial support was given by Singapore and Malayan Chinese businessmen to fund the revolution.

Lim Boon Keng's contributions to improving Singapore society cannot be fully listed. He was also a banker, instrumental in the formation of the Oversea Chinese Banking Corporation (OCBC), one of Singapore's premier banks. He was a polymath and mastered the Chinese language, then promoted it to his fellow Peranakans. Born in 1869, chronologically he was a man of the 19th century, but he had a vision that would make him fit very well into the 21st century.

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Photo courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board