

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.

Elaine Cheong is an FOM docent who guides at five of the seven museums that FOM is associated with. She is also the current president of FOM Singapore.

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

Holding Court Beyond the Kitchen

By Khong Swee Lin

The property of one particular Peranakan lady lies not in the iconic mortar and pestle, but in a remnant of 17th century England - horsehair curled and tailed; usually found bobbing around within the precincts of the Royal Courts of Justice, London.

Standing proudly atop its box on the third floor of the Peranakan Museum, the barrister's wig that belonged to the late Madam Kwa Geok Choo (21 December 1920 - 2 October 2010) is very much a tribute not only to its erstwhile owner, but also to the era's fledgling coterie of able Peranakan women. They dared to strike out beyond the Peranakan woman's traditional confines - the *dapor* (kitchen) and along with that, the expected mastery of Peranakan cuisine.

The third daughter of Mr and Mrs Kwa Siew Tee (he was one of the founders of the OCBC Bank which he served

as General Manager from 1935 to 1945, the Municipal Commissioner of the Colony of Singapore in 1947 and Public Service Commissioner in 1953), Kwa Geok Choo secured a place in Peranakan history by topping the Senior Cambridge Examination, class of 1936, and then attended Singapore's premier Raffles Institution Special Class.

After Singapore's establishment as a colony, English-medium schools such as St Margaret's Girls' School (1842), the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus (1854), Raffles Girls' School (1879) and Methodist Girls' School (1887), were founded by various missionary groups. However, the colonial administration's attitude towards mission schools was to regard them as a means of providing minimal literacy and grants were kept small.

By the turn of the century, increasing prosperity provided the impetus for the development of education. Straits Chinese leaders established schools, for instance the English-medium Singapore Chinese Girls' School (1899) and the Chinese-medium Chung Hwa Girls' School (1911). The founding of the latter was tied up with the rising tide of Chinese nationalism and events such as the Boxer Rebellion.

As the English language became popular in Southeast Asia, the Peranakans embraced not only the language, but also the education system. The Queen's Scholarships founded by Sir Cecil Clementi Smith in 1885 and awarded by the Straits Settlements' government, provided opportunities for British subjects of the Settlements to continue their education in the United Kingdom. Maggie Tan, a Peranakan and descendant of Tan Tock Seng, was the first female recipient of the scholarship in 1930.

English and Baba Malay were the dominant languages of the Peranakans. A few Peranakan women began to practise medicine (Dr Lee Choo Neo) and law (Teo Soon Kim was admitted to the Bar of the Straits Settlements in 1929) and



Barrister's wig - Madam Kwa Geok Choo

Lim Beng Hong of Penang, (the first woman qualified to practise law in Malaya in 1927) and they began writing to newspapers, not only about their lot in life, but also to advocate the equality of the sexes and the adoption of modern practices.

Kwa Geok Choo further distinguished herself by winning the Queen's Scholarship whilst at Raffles College in 1947 (she had resumed her studies after the war) and headed off to Girton College, Cambridge, where she earned a First Class Honours degree in Law. After being called to the bar of the Middle Temple, she returned to Singapore to begin an illustrious career as a conveyancing lawyer and co-founded the firm of Lee & Lee. It is noteworthy that despite her career, she put her family first, eschewing duties such as entertaining clients.

Besides being an advocate of equality for women, her forte in drafting documents led her to draft clauses pertaining to mutual government guarantees of water agreements between Johor and Singapore upon the separation of Singapore from Malaysia.

Her stand on women's rights led to the introduction of the Women's Charter in 1961, which provided for monogamous marriages, a big step in those days. The late Madam Kwa, wife of Singapore's former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, was undoubtedly an excellent Peranakan woman, steel clothed in velvet, as Peranakan women were known to be!

Khong Swee Lin is a freelance writer and has contributed the text for three photo-books on Singapore and Indonesia by her husband Carl-Bernd Kaehlig. She is also a docent with the Peranakan Museum and the Malay Heritage Centre and is currently guiding Princely Treasures of the House of Liechtenstein.

Photo courtesy of the Peranakan Museum

Zubir Said and the Strohmenger Piano

By Sylvia Khoo

The late Zubir Said (1907-1987) not only composed Singapore's national anthem, *Majulah Singapura* (Onward Singapore), on a grand Strohmenger piano, but also the Children's Day song, *Semoga Bahagia* (May You Achieve Happiness). This piano was the platform from which sprang hundreds of his musical compositions and from which numerous musical aspirants were nurtured. The piano is part of the permanent collection of the National Museum of Singapore, but is currently on loan to the Malay Heritage Centre. It is displayed in the exhibition gallery that traces the development of the Malay music industry. When the National Museum of Singapore held a special exhibition in 2010 titled *Singapore 1960*, this piano was one of the exhibition's star pieces and was fittingly situated next to the portrait of the swearing-in of Singapore's first prime minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew.

Zubir Said was born in West Minangkabau, Sumatra. In 1928, he joined a *keroncong* (an Indonesian style of music) group where he learned to play the violin and travelled throughout Sumatra. He arrived in Singapore during the same year and joined the *bangsawan* (often referred to as Malay opera) troupe, City Opera. In 1936 he worked with the record company HMV. By the late 1940s, the Malay film industry in Singapore had started to flourish and was playing a major role in producing composers, with Zubir Said becoming one of the most prolific. In 1949 he was Orchestra Conductor with Malay Film Productions Ltd, owned by the Shaw Brothers. In the early 1950s, he switched to Cathay-Keris Film Productions as Music Director and was with the company until 1964. The period between the 1940s and the 1960s was deemed the Golden Age of Singapore Cinema.

Said composed the musical scores and songs for some of the most iconic and memorable films in Singapore's film history, films such as *Sumpah Pontianak* (Curse of the Vampire), *Sri Mersing* (Beauty of Mersing) and *Chuchu Datok Merah* (the Granddaughter of Datok Merah), and worked with celebrated singers, actors and actresses including P Ramlee, Saloma,



Zubir Said's piano, photo courtesy of the Malay Heritage Centre

Nona Asiah, Abdullah Cik, R Ismail, amongst many others.

During the 1950s, he was widely regarded as a talented music composer who incorporated not only the indigenous music of the region, but also elements of western and other Asian music into his compositions. In 1958, the mayor of Singapore recommended to the City Council that Zubir Said compose the song to mark the official opening of the Victoria Memorial Hall and Victoria Theatre. Thus the song, *Majulah Singapura*, was born.

On 30 May 1959, Singapore attained self-government after 140 years of British rule, and Lee Kuan Yew became its first prime minister. Singapore was a new nation composed of people of different racial origins. It was recognised that symbols were needed to unite them. The ultimate symbol to achieve that goal was a national anthem that would reflect the country's dreams and aspirations. The singing of a country's anthem always stirs emotions. The search began for an anthem and

Majulah Singapura was chosen for its exhortations of looking ahead, with a hope for success and happiness, united in a new spirit of working as one people.

On 11 November 1959, *Majulah Singapura* was officially declared the national anthem of Singapore and on 3 December 1959, the anthem made its debut at the installation of Yusof bin Ishak as the Yang di Pertuan Negara, Singapore's head of state. The national anthem is sung every day in schools during the flag-raising ceremony and on special occasions such as Singapore's National Day on 9 August.

To Zubir Said, the strength of a country lay in its people. Hence the first line of the anthem begins with "*Mari kita rakyat Singapura*" – Come, we the people of Singapore.

Sylvia Khoo has worked as an accountant, lecturer and business development manager in Singapore, Australia and the UK. She is currently an FOM docent at NMS, TPM, SYSNMH and MHC.

Photo courtesy of the Malay Heritage Centre

Home Ownership for the People

Photo News #289, dated Monday October 17, 1966

By Gretchen Liu

Ephemera have played an increasingly important role in narrating history, bringing the past to life in fascinating and unexpected ways. The National Museum of Singapore's History Gallery has incorporated many captivating examples into its displays, including five photo news posters from the 1960s in the *New Nation* area of the gallery. The poster *Home Ownership for the People* appears alongside four others – *The Need to Build National Defence*, *Emphasis on Science and Technology*, *Singapore Goes Gay for Malaysia Day* and *The Assessment and Reformation of Education*.

During the 1960s, when television was in its infancy, such posters produced by the Ministry of Culture were an effective way of keeping citizens informed of new directions, new policies and of the changing landscape. Captioned in the four official languages, the posters were displayed in gathering places such as community centres. They were printed on inexpensive paper and not meant to last: the very definition of ephemera is 'transitory written or printed matter not meant to be retained or preserved'.

The public housing programme was one of the most important undertakings of the decade. By the time of self-government in 1959, the housing shortage, with its problems of overcrowded slums and squalid squatter areas, had reached alarming proportions – exacerbated first by the Pacific War in the 1940s and then by the fast-growing population in the 1950s. The Housing and Development Board (HDB) was established on 1 February 1960. It replaced the colonial Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT). During almost 40 years of existence, the SIT built various housing projects (Tiong Bahru dates from the mid-1930s), but barely scratched the surface of the problem.

The HDB quickly set priorities. The first five-year plan (1960-1965) focused on rental units for low-income families. In 1964 the Home Ownership Scheme was introduced so that flats could be purchased. Another turning point came four

years later when the government allowed the use of Central Provident Fund savings as down-payments for units.

Queenstown was the first satellite town, its development started by the SIT in the 1950s and continued by the HDB. Toa Payoh, the second satellite town, was the HDB's first complete effort where the high-rise, high-density New Town concept – with several neighbourhoods grouped around a lively town centre with entertainment and shopping – was first implemented. Although the buildings shown in this 1966 poster seem primitive by today's standards, they were positively luxurious compared to living conditions for many at the time since they came equipped with services we now consider basic: electricity, flush toilets and piped water.

Once a dream, home ownership for the people was soon a reality. By 1965, the HDB had completed 54,430 units. By 1976, more than 50 percent of the population was living in HDB flats. Today, there are more than 20 new towns and over 80 percent of Singaporeans claim HDB homes.

Gretchen Liu is a historian and author. Her published works include *Pastel Portraits*, *One Hundred Years of the National Museum*, *Raffles Hotel* and *Singapore: A Pictorial History 1819 – 2000*.

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



Before television, posters like these provided Singapore's people with news and information

Social Change and Contemporary Art in Singapore

By Marie-Pierre Mol



Parklife, by Chun Kai Feng

Since Singapore's independence in 1965, the urban landscape has completely changed. This metamorphosis was the result of a political and a social vision for the city state. Social housing programmes were conceived and implemented in order to improve the quality of life of its population. Through this transformation, a large part of Singapore's national heritage and its collective memory had to be destroyed to make room for new housing estates, while the traditional *kampung* (village) life disappeared. Communal values receded and individualism became more prominent.

Parklife, by Chun Kai Feng, an artwork showcased in the Learning Gallery 2 at the Singapore Art Museum attempts to address this particular issue. At first glance, the work looks like an architectural prototype, but in reality it belongs to a series of sculptures that represent iconic structures in Singapore. More specifically, *Parklife* represents a multi-storey building with a playground, and one could even say it looks like an architectural model of a Housing Development Board estate. Upon closer review, however, there seems to be something very disturbing about this sculpture. What's most surprising is the playground, which appears unfriendly and even dysfunctional in its design and function. Indeed the strings on the swings are too short and the slide also seems unusable. The fence around

the estate and the loudspeakers awkwardly allude to a scene from a prison or a concentration camp.

It is safe to say that there is a sharp social critique in Chun Kai Feng's *Parklife*. The work implies that what was built to improve the quality of life of Singapore's inhabitants actually resulted in creating a lifeless and even alienating environment. As depicted in *Parklife*, the genuine pleasures of community life seem to have disappeared, creating a sense of loneliness, monotony and ennui.

Chun Kai Feng is a young Singaporean artist. Born in 1982, he studied art at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, majoring in printmaking. He also has a Masters in Fine Arts from the Glasgow School of Art. Chun was the recipient of the Singapore National Art Council Bursary in 2009, the Singapore Art Exhibition Prize in 2009 and the Arts Creation Fund (2012).

Marie-Pierre Mol was the Executive Director of the French Business Association in Singapore from 1992 to 1996. In 2010 she co-founded Intersections, a nomadic art gallery.

Photo courtesy of the Singapore Art Museum

Towards Social Change: Performance Art in Singapore

By Loredana Pazzini-Paracciani

Singapore, renowned for its tidiness, efficiency, social order and technological development, is adding its relevance as an international art hub to this already impressive list. The efforts that the government is undertaking to place Singapore on the art-world map, particularly within the Southeast Asia region, are commendable. Singapore has covered a lot of ground in the last 20 years – from welcoming international art fairs, to the forthcoming launch of the National Art Gallery, art festivals and its own biennale.

On the one hand, this indicates a formidable development of the art scene in the small island-state. On the other, censorship and regulations in the art-making process are still impinging on Singapore's artistic creativity.

Prominent in this regard was the ban imposed on performance art in 1994 by the National Arts Council (NAC), after the controversial performance of *Brother Cane*, by Josef Ng. The ban was lifted in 2003, after almost 10 years, although artists are still required to obtain a licence to perform and regulations still apply. These govern subject-matter, spontaneity and risk-taking, all integral elements of performance art.

The pivotal *The Artists Village* (TAV) group was hit hard by the 1994 NAC provision. Much of the momentum they had accumulated was lost, along with some of their practitioners. The group had been founded in 1988 by Tang Da Wu precisely with the aim of experimenting with traditional art practices in Singapore.

Notwithstanding this, many Singapore artists have overcome the limitations of the ban and post-ban periods by experimenting with performance art via a multiplicity of art strategies that span both conceptual art and more traditional practices.

Jeremy Hiah, interdisciplinary artist and vice-president of TAV, produced the photographic essay *Paradise Terrorize* in 2008 as part of a bigger production that started in 2004 under the title *Raw/War*. The idea was to underline the duality of concepts such as peace/war, love/hatred, freedom/restraint, by employing photography as a visual strategy to document a staged performance.

Hiah, together with fellow performance artists from TAV, Lee Wen, Tang Da Wu and Kai Lam, among others, perform a 'tribal' dance in *Paradise Danger Dancers*, perhaps a ritual to exorcise demons or prepare for combat. The performers are half-naked but for diapers and masks.

Beyond the affecting association of the balaclava with the tribal notion of a gathering – a reminder that we are all part of a ritual whether prescribed by tradition, religion or society – the significance of this piece in the Singapore context lies even further, that is, the photograph, acting as documentation, enables both the artist and the viewer



Paradise Danger Dancer, ed. 1/8, 2006, digital print on canvas, 121 ´ 182 cm. Singapore Art Museum collection.

to participate in the art-making process. By evoking performance rituals through the photographic medium, the work becomes refreshing and stimulating, despite the gravity of the thematic approach.

It is in recognition of subtle works such as *Paradise Danger Dancers* that Singapore is slowly engaging in social change, moving towards a better understanding and repositioning of performance art in the local art scene. By bringing to the fore a work labelled photographic, but which is essentially performative, Hiah facilitates the validity of performance art as an act of artistic and conceptual expression not to be feared, but to be welcomed and nurtured.

This and other works in Singapore contemporary art history have served as stepping stones to greater acceptance of performance art – changes that brought *Brother Cane* back full circle in 2012. Seventeen years after Josef Ng's controversial performance, Singapore artist Loo Zhian reenacted *Brother Cane* and thereby closed the chapter on this event. Loo's reenactment, together with public support and the authorities' concurrence, has opened the possibility of a new discourse on performance art, a discourse that suffered a temporal fracture for almost 10 years before resurfacing in the Singapore art scene.

Loredana Pazzini-Paracciani has a Masters degree in Asian Art Histories. She writes for numerous publications and works as an independent curator for commercial and institutional places in Singapore and Bangkok. Her academic and curatorial focus and research revolve mostly around contemporary art in Thailand and Singapore.

The Qur'an

By Patricia Bjaaland Welch

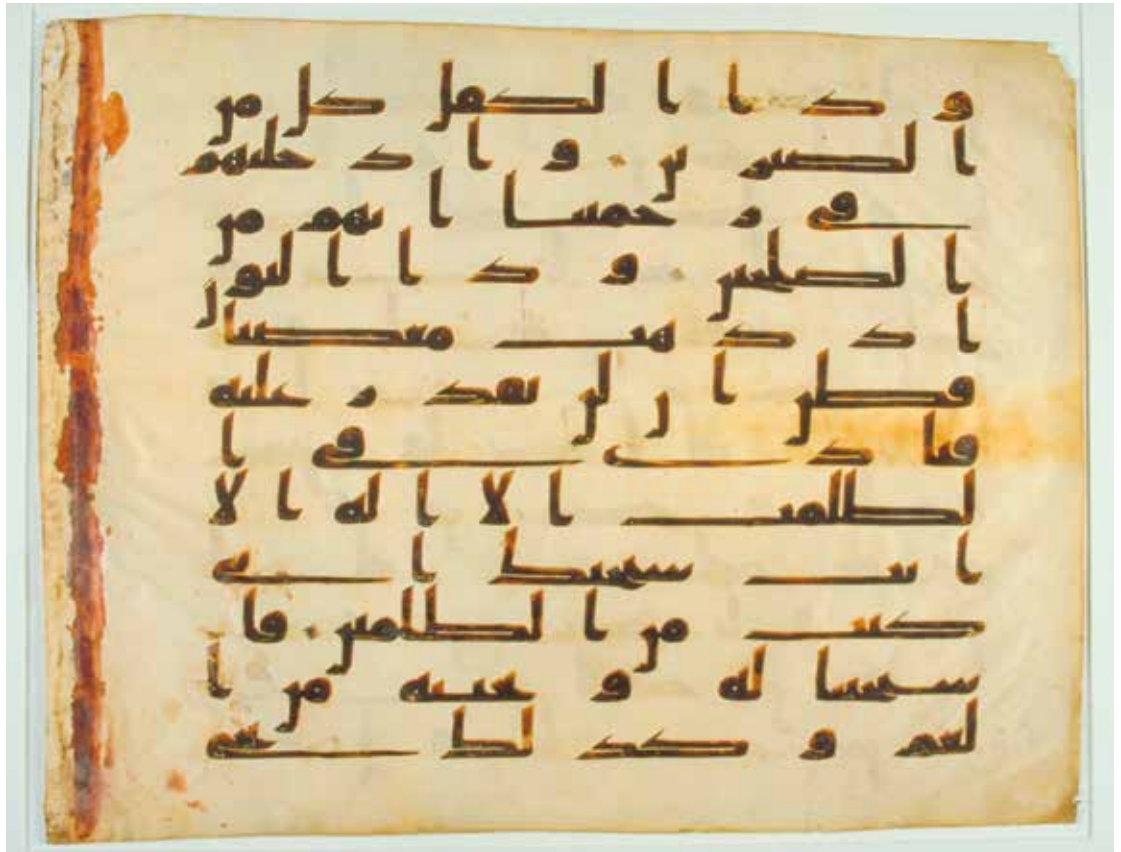
When we think of agents of social change, we tend to think of people – politicians or inventors – yet books can also be agents of social change and none perhaps fits this criterion more wholly than the sacred text of Islam, the Qur'an.

Its 114 *surahs* or chapters, are arranged from longest to shortest (each consisting of three to 287 verses) with the exception of the first *surah*, an opening text that praises Allah, and the last two, which are sometimes referred to as 'charms'.

The Prophet Muhammad's teachings were originally orally transmitted, but with the deaths of many of the men who had

served as custodians of these recitations, they began to be transcribed. Caliph Uthman (644-656 CE) is given the most credit for their final recension as it was under his caliphate that the verses underwent their most thorough scrutiny; the men of Uthman's council were meticulous in examining the collected verses and in ensuring that none of the Prophet's words had been omitted.

These collected *surahs* focus on Allah and urge the faithful to practise righteous lives, to perform "commendable deeds and to refrain from what is objectionable in the sight of God", but they did much, much more. They transformed what was basically a land of tribes – pagan peoples often at war with one another – into a nation of believers and thereby created a brotherhood of all its faithful. The Qur'an's *surahs* cover such broad social legislation topics as the treatment of women, children and slaves, the destitute and needy, thieves as well as saints. In them, one finds the basic laws of Muslim society. In short, the Qur'an, the 'Word of God' as revealed to its Prophet, "instilled in wild tribes the will to fraternise rather than to continue their fratricidal wars and vendettas; to cohere rather than to pull apart when there was no precedent for cohesion in Arabia". For many believers, the Qur'an remains the main reference for matters mundane as well as



Qur'an folio, written in Kufic-Abbasid script, text from verses 85 to 88, early 8th century, North Africa

spiritual. "Indeed no book, sacred or nonsacred, has served, and continues to serve, so utilitarian a function to so many millions as the Qur'an, Allah's gift...through His prophet Muhammad." (Caesar E. Farah, *Islam*)

The Asian Civilisations Museum contains many Qur'ans and Qur'an pages in its extensive collection. The oldest is the beautiful eighth century Qur'an page written in Kufic-Abbasid script, preserved to this day because it was written on durable parchment (dried animal skin). In its time, it served only as a short-hand memory-jogger to its readers as it contains no diacritical or vocalisation marks. Today, the Qur'an is regarded as the single most-read religious text of all the world's religions and still serves as Islam's most revered 'go to' reference.

Patricia Bjaaland Welch spent the summer travelling around the Aegean area in search of ancient Greek and Roman links to early Buddhist art. She was especially excited to find two objects in the Delos Archaeological Museum that she hopes to share with readers in an upcoming article.

Photo courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum, collection of the National Heritage Board

The Printing Press at the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall

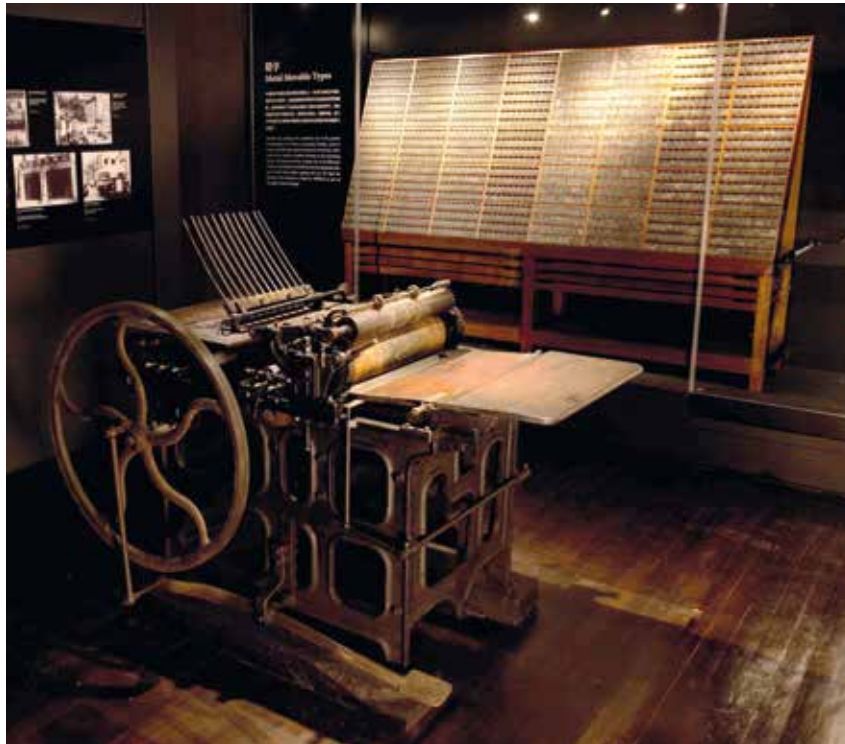
By Anne H Perng

What is seen today as the transformation of the information age with the arrival of internet technology had a parallel strand in the late 19th century with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1867. Progress made in maritime communications because of the canal's opening had parallel improvements in steam shipping, submarine telegraphy and the postal system. These tools of empire helped to increase demand for knowledge and benefited port cities such as Singapore where ideas, as well as people and products, were exchanged. They also provided a faster

means by which cultural exchange and interaction could take place. The demand for information was no different then than it is now and newspapers benefited from this.

When visitors pass through Gallery 4 of the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall (SYSNMH), they cannot help but notice the large printing press in the gallery. What they see is a Letter Press Cylinder Printing Machine that is still in working condition using movable type with foot pedals. This century-old machine is on loan from the Soo Peng Hang Press in Johor, Malaysia and was originally manufactured in Japan. The press serves as a symbol of social change with its power to disseminate information and political discourse, and in the context of SYSNMH, revolutionary ideas that ultimately led in 1911 to the end of dynastic reign in China.

The printed word emerging from printing presses in the late 19th century, like the widely distributed Chinese-run *Lat Pau*, allowed the overseas Chinese community to discover more about what was happening back in their ancestral homeland and more about the other Chinese communities within Nanyang, the old Chinese term for Southeast Asia. Because many such papers reprinted news from mainland China and from overseas newspapers with reformist ideas, these newspapers connected the Singaporean Chinese elite with a global network of other progressive Chinese, some of whom eventually supported Dr Sun.



The century-old, Letter Press Cylinder Printing Machine on display at the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall

When Dr Sun called for revolution at the turn of the 20th century, his ideas were not spread by the Internet as they would have been today, but by the power of the press. He became aware of local supporters of his revolutionary cause in Singapore because of a newspaper, an almanac from *Thoe Lam Jit Poh*, originally funded by Lim Nee Soon in 1904. Because of what he had read in that newspaper, Dr Sun wanted to meet those supporters, eventually arriving in Singapore in 1905 and meeting not only Lim Nee Soon, but also Tan Chor

Lam and Teo Eng Hock. They became his main supporters in the formation of the Chinese Revolutionary Alliance (*Tongmenhui*) in Singapore and their contributions are outlined in the museum.

Opening Chinese reading clubs and libraries formed part of Dr Sun's outreach programme among the Chinese Diaspora, such as the United Chinese Library founded in 1910 and still found today in Cantonment Road. These reading clubs extended the power of the printed word since nightly reading sessions were held. During these sessions, current events were read aloud to the illiterate, thus enlarging the scope of Sun's audience while soliciting support for his cause. Ultimately, the printed word had the power to publicise the debate about the cultural, social and political issues of the day, connect the various actors to each other and influence its readership through the editorial page.

Anne H Perng is currently a docent at the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall and the Asian Civilisations Museum and has previously served on the FOM Council as Honorary Secretary and Vice President.

Photo courtesy of the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall

Printmaking: Voice of Social Change

By Jessica Yap

The artist and the printing press are a truly potent combination. Art often functions as a reflection of social consciousness and while artists have sought to reveal socio-political truths in their work, prints have always been intended to engage the viewer, to share information or opinion, to be the voice for a cause or to inspire action. Through the times, artists and the printing press have worked in harmonious collaboration to generate powerful images that reflect our human condition.

Today artists disseminate their messages with unprecedented rapidity and reach, and printmaking provides an advantage over other artistic forms such as painting and sculpture. Printmaking is considerably cheaper, more versatile and can be rapidly created en masse thereby amplifying the voice and the message.

Migration first became a political issue in the Philippines when the Marcos regime began to 'export labour' in the 1970s as a source of revenue. Millions left their native land in the painful quest for opportunity. Artists like Benedicto Cabrera, better known as BenCab, led the Social-Realism art movement in reaction to the social problems that the policies produced, addressing change, migration, dislocation, servitude, exile and desperation – all embroiled in the great Filipino Diaspora.

During his printmaking residencies at the Singapore Tyler Print Institute (STPI) in 2006 and 2010, BenCab adopted the printing press to address these themes, thereby becoming an impressively eloquent historian and social commentator – fewer words and more punch.

Glimpse of the Past/ Present XIX 2010

traces the evolution of some northern Philippine tribal minorities and the dying out of tradition as the younger generation moved out of the rural areas to the cities and possibly even out of the country, to find employment. The image of transformation and dislocation becomes the language of change and an emigration that is steeped in nostalgia. In this print, the same girl is rendered in two different ways. On the right, she is drawn in shades of neutral brown, a topless Igorot maiden with native adornments in her hair and hanging from her neck. On the left, she is transformed through the use of a rusty hue. She is the girl of today, clad in



Glimpse of the Past/Present XIX (2010), Lithography and screen print on STPI handmade paper, 76 x 102 cm, © BenCab / Singapore Tyler Print Institute

a collared T-shirt, her hair pulled back, arms crossed, looking rather defensive and insecure, despite the slight smile. BenCab's juxtaposition of "what was" against "what now is" has long been a personal artistic stamp, resonant with his message of nostalgia for the loss of the past in exchange for an uncertain future.

Similarly, Qiu Zhijie, who did his STPI residency in 2008, continued his explorations of China's changing cultural landscape with his printmaking and radical experimentation in various artistic mediums. Qiu explored the basis of nationhood and geopolitical and psychological attachments. He combined the imagery of ancient Chinese aesthetics, Taoist philosophy and Cultural Revolution symbols to create a conceptual map that questions the ideas that built a cyclical China.

In *Ataractic of Zhuang Zi*, Qiu recounts Taoist classics by injecting a dose of ancient philosophy to 'tranquillise' the strains of historical burdens and anxieties of contemporary life. Chinese gourds were a symbol of medicine, wine and magic – of happy intoxication or soothing escape and healing. But the voice of the artist echoes the reality of old ideals and philosophies being tipped over and inverted. The delivery method has morphed from a pleasurable welcome to a clinical, almost virulent application.

In response to a host of global challenges ranging from political repression to economic crisis to endemic poverty and human rights violations, artists still express a shared belief in the power of art to promote and effect social change, and truly the potent combination of artist and printmaking results in a New Realism.

Jessica Yap spends her 'free' time as a docent at STPI and her 'conscious' hours as a wife and mother to Ariel and Joshua. In her 'unconscious' hours, she vacillates around in the world of numbers and finance.
