

The Printing Press at the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall

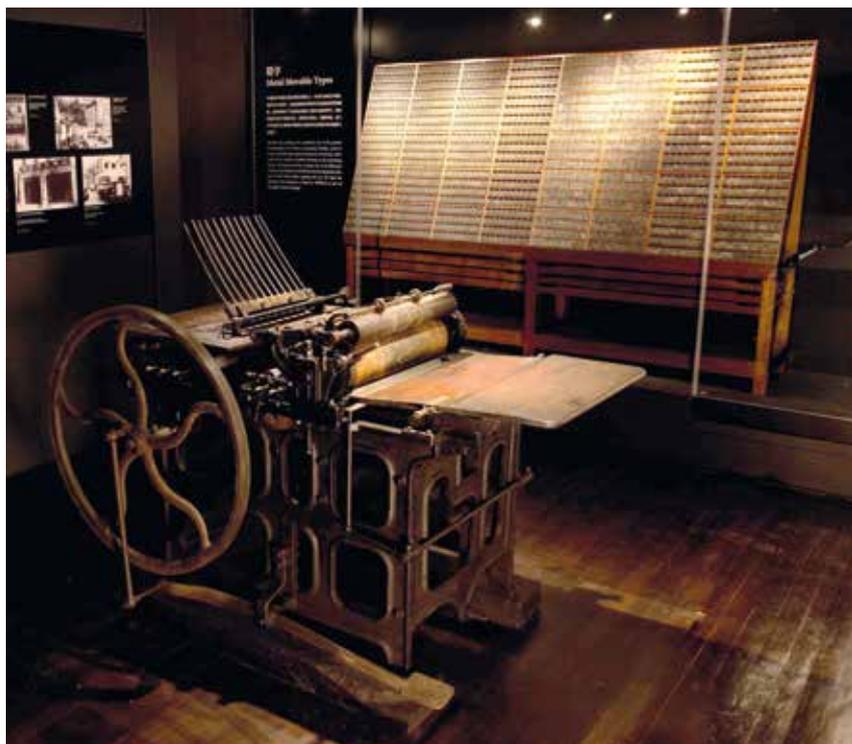
By Anne H Perng

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