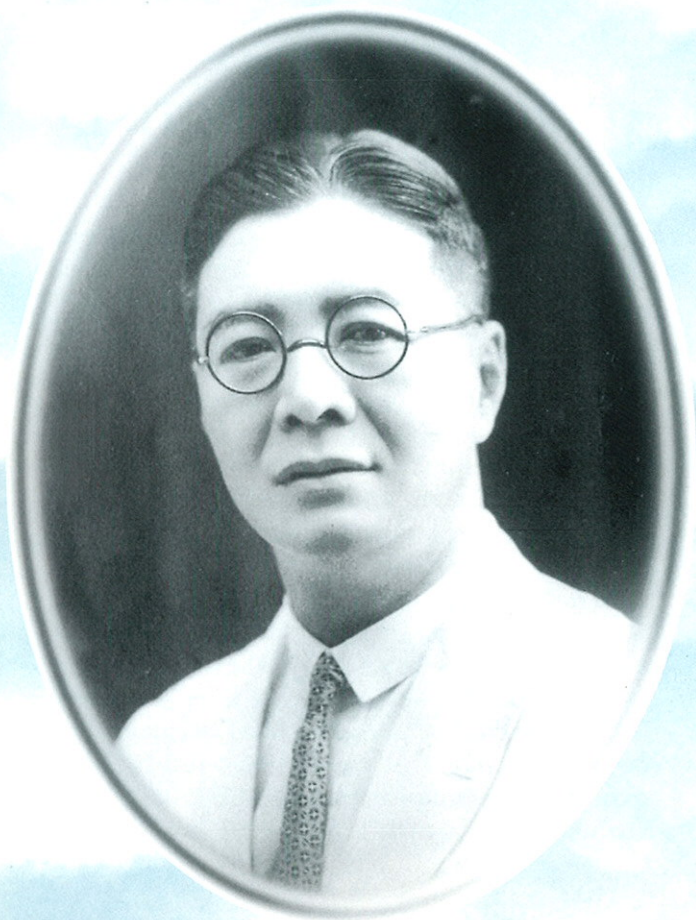


DR CHEN SU LAN



**PREACHING
THROUGH HIS PRACTICE**

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PREACHING THROUGH HIS PRACTICE

Physician, anti-opium fighter, philanthropist and social reformer, Chen Su Lan, was one of Singapore Methodism's most distinguished leaders: a legend in his time. During his early boyhood, he lived in China during the dying days of the Qing Dynasty and saw first-hand the harmful effects of the opium habit which had been forced on the Chinese by the British as a direct result of the Opium Wars. Dreadful crimes were committed to support its abuse.

Born in Fuzhou in 1885, he was a third generation Methodist,¹ brought up by his deeply devout mother, a widow who sincerely believed what Jesus taught about God. But it was only when the young lad read the Bible in 'baihua' (spoken language) that he suddenly saw that the written word had any meaning. He enrolled at the Anglo-Chinese College, Fuzhou, at the age of 15, and at a revival meeting



Chen Su Lan Methodist Home - First Home at Ayer Gemuroh, Changi. Now compulsorily acquired for the development of Changi International Airport.

held by visiting Bishop Bashford, prayed that God would use him like Moses, and even pledged to become a preacher one day.

Not long after, like many young men in those days, he set sail for Singapore, and joined the first batch of students at the newly opened Medical College. After he graduated, he was very busy not only with his medical practice, but served in a number of important committees: the Tan Tock Seng Hospital Management Committee; the Central Midwives Board; and the Council of the King Edward VII College of Medicine. He also founded the Alumni Association of the Medical College and was elected President of the Malayan Branch of the British Medical Association. Most people would have said that it was enough work for one man. But not the good doctor.

In Singapore, as in China, the opium habit was a grim social problem. The Colonial government monopolised the sale of the drug as a means to 'control' its use. Remembering his early experience in China, he decided to fight the menace, even though this was considered 'disloyal' by the British and courted banishment. Starting the anti-opium drive in 1929, he founded the Anti-Opium Clinic which treated many poor labourers who had been addicted to the habit, some even giving away daughters for adoption because they could not stop smoking the drug. Unfortunately, the Clinic had to close its doors at the outbreak of the War in China in 1937, when donations from Singapore were diverted to the China Relief Fund. However, after WWII, the British Government decided to ban the sale of opium, limiting its use to medical and scientific purposes. Perhaps, Chen Su Lan's efforts may have helped, after all.

When the Pacific War broke out in December 1941, the Japanese army wreaked havoc on Singapore and the rest of Southeast Asia. The Malay Peninsula was quickly occupied, and Chen Su Lan, who foresaw that Singapore would surrender, decided



*Some children of the Home at Seletar Air Base.
Circa 1976-77 .*

to flee on one of the last ships leaving the 'fortress' on Friday 13th February 1942. But the ship was attacked, bombed and set on fire; the passengers abandoned ship and it seemed like the end.

But, it was not to be. While floating and drifting helplessly, he shivered terribly from prolonged immersion in the cold sea water, so that he really wanted to die. He wondered, "*What have I done to deserve this fate?*" His answer was to review his past. In the eyes of the world, he might have been considered successful and useful; but he saw himself as having fallen short of what he had set out to be and do. He recalled the pledge he had made to be a preacher and to be used by God, and realised "*how my independence of Him had created a barrier between me and Him*", thereby only partially fulfilling his youthful commitment made many years before. He thought it sinful and decided that he would henceforth live fully for God and not for himself.

He did not die, but he felt he was born again. "*My old world had gone down to the bottom of the sea some 60 miles south of Singapore and out of the watery grave was now risen a regenerated and re-incarnated soul to prove to the world the eternal but simple truth: 'Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.'*" (John 12.24)

Miraculously, he was washed on to a sandy beach, and a place of safety as he had prayed for.²

His experience on the brink of death at sea had a profound effect on him, as did another crisis when he returned to 'Syonan' (the Japanese name for Singapore). He was detained by the dreaded Kempeitai for questioning because an informer had told the Japanese that he and other Methodist Church leaders were conspiring against the Japanese government. Again, he was miraculously preserved from physical punishment. Although his home was searched, the Japanese did not find documents which would have incriminated him, and the informer was made to look foolish. He could think of such Bible passages as *"Your father knoweth what things ye have need of before ye ask Him"* (Matt: 6.8); *"When ye pray, believe that ye shall receive them"* (Mark 11:24); and *"Nevertheless, not as I will, but as Thou wilt."* (Luke 22:42)



Present Home at 202 Serangoon Garden Way.

After the Japanese occupation, he found new life and commitment to serve the Lord. Invited by the British Military Administration to join the Advisory Council, he used the opportunity to speak out fearlessly on social problems which were the result of the four year occupation. More than that, as a

practical way to solve them, he founded the Chinese YMCA in 1945-46 to provide the demoralised youth of Singapore with an opportunity to rehabilitate themselves.

Turning to his personal interest and commitment, he formed the Chen Su Lan Trust in 1947³ which disbursed funds and land to such Christian organisations as the Scripture Union, and for the founding of the Methodist Children's Home which was named after him. Here, children from broken families could grow up in a Christian family atmosphere. It helped to raise needy children who have themselves grown up and raised their own families, many of whom are active in the churches.

*'Not to be
ministered
unto, but to
minister'*

Although Chen Su Lan did not achieve his prayer to be a 'preacher' of the Word in its literal sense, his whole life was dedicated to serving the needs of God's children, feeding His sheep, and washing the feet of those who gathered at the table of the Lord, hungering and thirsting for the bread and water of life. He steadfastly served the Lord in the spirit of the quotation which he chose as the motto of the Alumni Association: *'Not to be ministered unto, but to minister.'*

Footnote :

- ¹ T.C. Nga, 'A Man of courage and concern', MM, May-June 1965, p. 9.
- ² Chen Su Lan, 'Remember Pompong and Oxley Rise', p. 69.
- ³ MM, July-August, 1972, p. 15.