

How Chong Eu's farsightedness helped engineer Penang's rebirth

Not - 18/11/2019 15-6

ON the day Tun Dr Lim Chong Eu died on Nov 24, 2010, I sat in front of Datuk Seri Chet Singh at my then office at the Penang Institute, listening to Chet reading out loud his draft eulogy for Dr Lim. I thought to myself, "We must get a book out on Dr Lim and his time".

I was elected to Parliament representing the Penang constituency of Bukit Bendera in 2008, giving me a rare opportunity to interact with Dr Lim during his final years, witnessing first-hand his grand world view and his delicate political touch.

In the tide of public sentiment marking his death, the central theme that stood out was his role as the "Father of Modern Penang".

At the funeral, as I walked with many Penangites behind the hearse along Jalan Lim Chwee Leong, a road named after Dr Lim's father, thousands of ordinary people lined the streets in sorrow. Comments repeatedly heard was that Dr Lim got them out of joblessness.

His dauntlessness and farsightedness helped engineer Penang's rebirth after the crisis of losing its Free Port status — this he did by inviting foreign direct investment to build the manufacturing sector with the ultimate aim of



LIEW
CHIN
TONG

providing decent salaries for those troubled by a high unemployment rate.

In contrast to the prevailing leftist/nationalist climate of the day, his decision to attract investment from countries symbolically regarded as imperialistic/capitalist was an audacious "Blue Ocean Strategy".

While Singapore was the regional leader, Penang quickly became the first stop for foreign investment in Malaysia.

Fifty years after that export-led industrialisation strategy, which presupposed the United States (and to a lesser extent, Europe), as the final export destination, the scenarios have probably completely changed, especially since the global financial crisis in 2008, which saw growth in the US not being accompanied by much transformative job growth.

But what was central to Dr

Lim's project was job creation — a theme that is still very relevant to Penang and Malaysia today.

To move his economic agenda while being constrained by an uncooperative federal bureaucracy, Dr Lim created the Penang Development Corporation (PDC) to bypass the bureaucratic hurdle of the State Secretariat, which was under the federal government's control.

Helmed by the then 35-year-old Chet, the PDC prevailed over numerous limitations to become a powerhouse to be reckoned with.

Fifty years after Dr Lim's Gerakan won the Penang government in 1969, a decade of federal (Barisan Nasional) and state (Pakatan) governments being under different parties since 2008, and the new scenario of a federal Pakatan government and a 10-year-old Pakatan state government, the federal-state relation and its role in economic development is still something that requires a lot of rethinking and reconfiguring.

Critics often forget that Penang was Dr Lim's last bastion of retreat. He had originally set his sights on national politics, with an eye on international affairs.

In May 2009, I attended his private 90th birthday dinner together with the then Penang chief

minister Lim Guan Eng.

Dr Lim was concise and articulate in discussing the world economy, comparing its current condition with the tumultuous period of post-World War 2 reconstruction. His insights were uncommonly acute.

In the same year, I represented the chief minister at the Penang Skills Development Centre's (PSDC) 20th anniversary celebration.

This was most probably the last official function that Dr Lim attended. As the founder of PSDC, he was invited to officiate at the ceremony. Former chief minister Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon was also present.

There was a large treasure chest on stage, in which numerous gold-foiled chocolates lay surrounding a PSDC commemorative book.

Dr Lim was the only guest invited on stage to speak. Before leaving the stage, he took two chocolates from the treasure chest with a mysterious smile. Under the glare of cameras, he slowly made his way down the stage.

He paused at the front row to pass a chocolate each to Koh and me, unwittingly providing photographers with the "Kodak moment" of the day.

I marvelled at the political savvy of this political giant, even in the tiniest of gestures.

Notwithstanding that, documenting the golden era of Dr Lim was no easy task. Suggestions were made to Dr Lim himself to allow scholars to write his biography. However, his answer was always noncommittal.

His swansong interview — by *Penang Economic Monthly* editor Dr Ooi Kee Beng — was published in the magazine's revamped issue in October 2009 by the Socio-economic and Environmental Research Institute, of which I was then the executive director.

Nine years after his death, I am glad that this book (see report above), which consists of a collection of articles and essays on his tenure, is finally available to all, especially the younger generation of Penangites who never lived through the Dr Lim era.

Half a century after 1969 and on Dr Lim's centenary birthday, this book is a modest attempt to bring attention to his legacies and help us to think through the future of Penang, Malaysia and the region.

The writer is deputy defence minister and former Bukit Bendera member of parliament, and board member and former executive director of Penang Institute