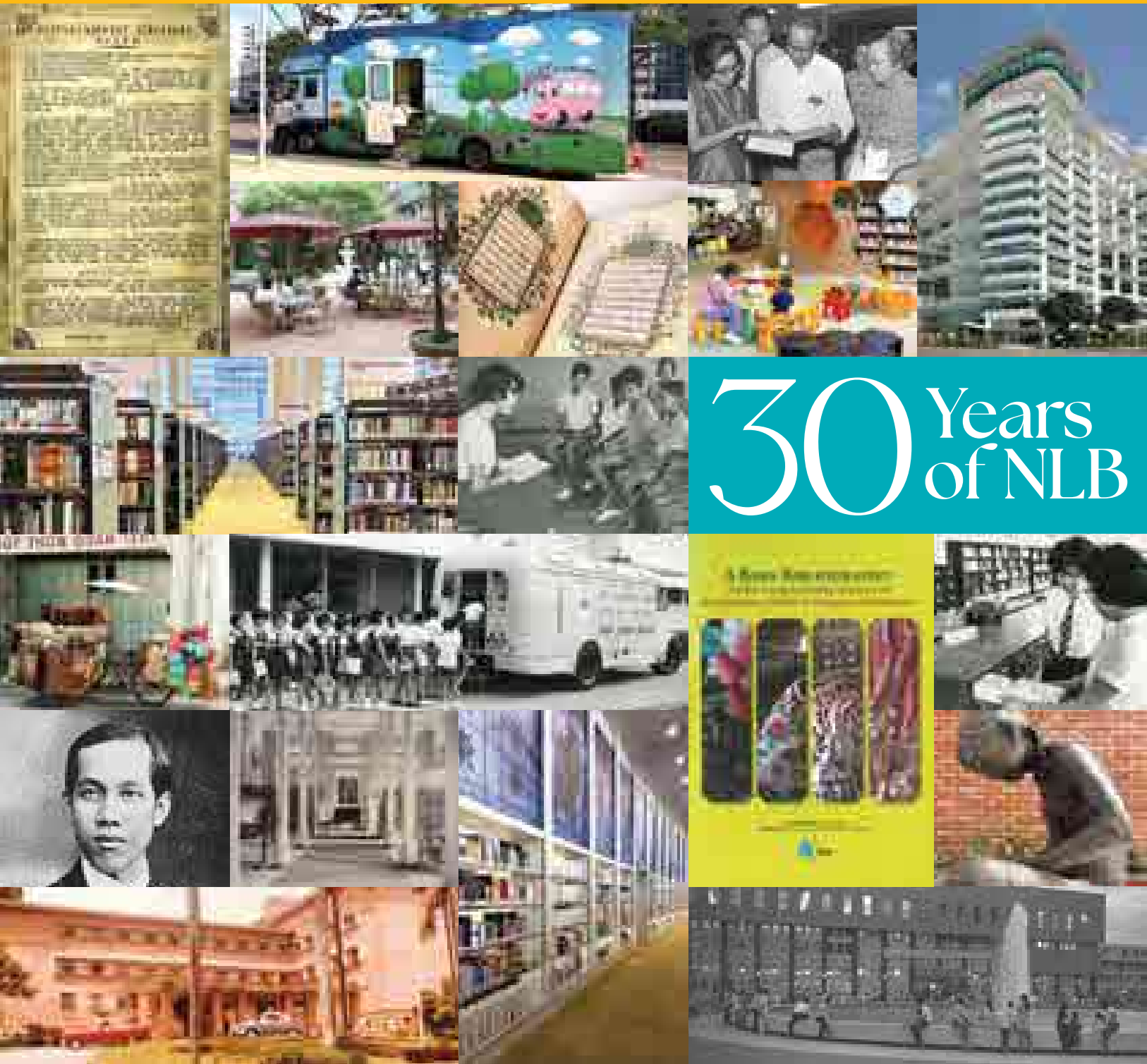


# biblioasia

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# 30 Years of NLB

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## Director's Note

This year, 2025, the National Library Board (NLB) celebrates its 30th anniversary. The NLB was formed in 1995, a move that was recommended in the landmark Library 2000 report. Of course, while the statutory board is three decades old, the history of the National Library goes back much further. As early as 1819, Stamford Raffles had envisaged a library in Singapore to “collect the scattered literature and traditions of the country”. That vision took some time to be realised though. The library got its start in 1837 as a humble school library, and over the next 188 years, it grew in size and scope. Today, the National Library and the National Archives help to make NLB one of Singapore’s key memory institutions.

To celebrate this milestone, do allow us to depart from our regular lineup of fascinating Singapore stories to tell you our stories (just as fascinating we hope). For this bumper issue of *BiblioAsia*, it is not possible to list all the articles in this note, but here are some highlights. I would suggest starting with the history of the National Library, which gives a quick, useful overview of the library’s development. Then there is the article on the Singapore and Southeast Asia Collection, which is the pride of the library. Nostalgia buffs will enjoy the photo essay revisiting the much-beloved former National Library on Stamford Road as well as the article on part-time branch libraries.

We also look at the National Archives, which originally began life as a department in the library. Two fascinating stories – on the sound and audiovisual records, as well as the photo collections of Studio De Luxe and Ronni Pinsler – give a flavour of the vast treasure trove that resides in the archives.

This issue is not merely about the history of institutions though. It is also important to also remember the men and women whose contributions have left a mark. Kung Tian Cheng rose to become First Clerk at the Raffles Library in the early 20th century. He helped compile a catalogue of the library’s holdings and, after leaving the library, lived a colourful life. He went to China where he became a journalist and also joined the library of Republic of China President Yuan Shikai.

Closer to the present day, we pay tribute to Hedwig Anuar, the first local director of the National Library. This larger-than-life woman was synonymous with the library, which is not surprising because she helmed it for more than two decades after Singapore’s independence. That article is accompanied by a personal essay penned by her daughter, Shirin Aroozoo, about what it was like growing up as Hedwig Anuar’s daughter.

This special edition is not just about looking back of course; it is also an opportunity to look ahead. In an age of ubiquitous information and generative AI, do libraries and librarians still have a future? In an interview, NLB Chief Executive Officer Ng Cher Pong sketches out how he thinks the libraries and archives can remain relevant in the face of these new challenges. We are certainly optimistic. We have been around for 188 years, and we plan on being around for another 188 more. Thank you for looking back and looking forward with us.

Alicia Yeo  
Director  
National Library

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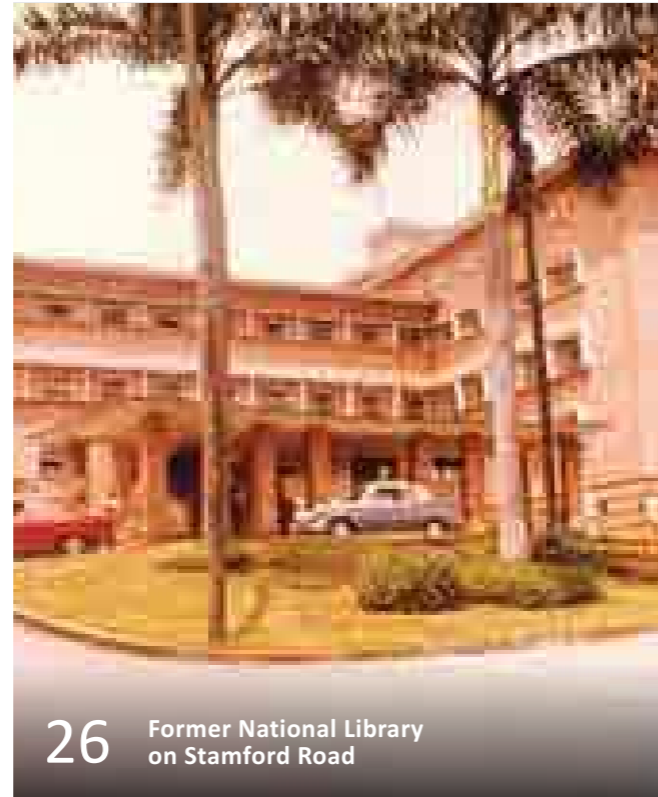
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# NEW EXPERIENCES AND DISCOVERIES

## The Libraries and Archives of Tomorrow

Ng Cher Pong, Chief Executive Officer of the National Library Board, shares his thoughts and insights on how libraries and archives can stay relevant in today's world.

By Kimberley Chiu

**The three pillars of the National Library Board are the National Library, the National Archives and the public libraries. How will the libraries and archives of the future look like to you?**

Libraries and archives are repositories of knowledge, information and cultural heritage. Their objectives are to collect and preserve materials, and make these accessible to library patrons for their educational, recreational and informational needs. At the National Library Board (NLB), in addition to the provision of traditional library and archives services, it's increasingly going to be about experiences – the experience of discovery, and the idea of library and archives as enablers of discovery. This is important because when we reflect on how we want patrons to experience our services, we have to think beyond the traditional roles of libraries and archives. We have

**Kimberley Chiu** is a Librarian with the Collection Planning and Development division. She selects books and eResources for children and young people across the public libraries.



Ng Cher Pong, Chief Executive Officer, National Library Board. Collection of the National Library Board.

to innovate, experiment and keep people interested, inspired, engaged and curious to know more. These are things that institutions like libraries and archives should do.

**What do you think are the key features of the libraries and archives of the future?**

The starting point for thinking about the libraries and archives of the future is the idea that we need to go beyond transactions. Our spaces will increasingly be about experiences. This brings us to the question: why would someone choose to visit a library?

Compare this with the retail industry: you can buy most things through e-commerce and have them delivered to your home. Why would anyone go to a retail store? Libraries are not dissimilar; after all, you can now get library books delivered to your home or to reservation lockers. You can even access eBooks from your phone. Therefore, the library needs to offer you something more than books.

In 2024, the total visitorship at the National Library, public libraries, National Archives and the Former Ford Factory was 19.8 million. This is a healthy number but it is not something to take for granted. To maintain and grow this number, we have to figure out how our spaces can create experiences that add value to our patrons.

Our patrons' needs are at the heart of what we do, and they come to us for many different reasons. Some want individual seats and quiet corners where they can have a respite; others come for books and programmes. These core services continue to be important to us. But we have to also provide interesting content-based experiences that present our patrons with something unexpected, such that they will want to keep coming back regularly.

I recently visited the Beijing Capital Library, which won the Public Library of the Year Award by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) in October 2024. That library invested heavily in experiences for patrons across the age spectrum. For example, the children's section has a 4D cinema complete with moving seats and special effects to make storytelling come alive. Such an experience may not usually be associated with libraries, but it is an illustration of how we need to break out of our traditional thinking and consider what makes sense from the user's point of view.

Many of these experiences will also be omni-channel – an experience that blurs the line between physical and digital – which allows you to access digital content in a physical space. We've already done this with new technology like the AR (augmented reality) artwork at the Central Public Library showcasing Singapore's landmarks, but there is scope to do much more.

My last point about the libraries and archives of the future is that we must be driven by discovery. This has always been the underlying reason people come to the library: to discover new and unexpected

things. If you already have a clear idea of what you want, such as a specific title, there are many options to fulfil this need. This includes ordering from Amazon.

But we do know that many people visit libraries – and bookshops – because they like browsing the shelves, hoping to make a serendipitous discovery. There is enormous appeal in the act of browsing, and thus we need to better develop browsing as a service to enhance one of the key appeals of physical spaces.

**Browsing suggests a greater role for serendipity in the library. Do you think that NLB's interest in building suggestion algorithms and personalised recommendations interferes with our ability to provide a robust browsing service?**

That depends on how you structure your algorithm. Commercial operators may choose to keep pushing the same types of resources and products to a user because doing so makes the user more likely to buy something. By doing so, you are indeed restricting a user's browsing behaviour. But for NLB, we are not constrained by such commercial considerations. We have freer rein to be more creative with the content we recommend, and to offer a broader range of reading materials to our patrons, including from our archives. We can take more risks and offer greater variety because we're not under pressure to monetise what people choose, and because we genuinely believe in providing breadth.

We do have to think carefully about how we can provide browsing as a service in the digital space. People are so used to social media feeds. Can a digital library look like a social media feed? Can a digital library's interface appear almost infinite in the same? How and what can we learn from social media algorithms – what lessons can we take from them?

The augmented reality artwork at the Central Public Library, titled "In Our Time", by artist and illustrator Lee Xin Li. Visitors can use their mobile devices to scan the mural and unlock special content, including articles, images and videos about Singapore's landmarks. Photo by Veronica Chee.





Chief Executive Officer Ng Cher Pong at *Rediscover Rediffusion* in Chinatown Point, 5–18 August 2024. The pop-up featured a curated collection of Mandarin and Chinese dialect Rediffusion programmes and photographs from the National Archives of Singapore. *Collection of the National Library Board.*

**Do you think it's possible for NLB to compete with social media for attention? Do we have the capabilities to match the experience of, for instance, TikTok?**

We aren't directly competing with social media. We may learn from and emulate their interfaces but the content we offer is different: we are reputable, substantial and of guaranteed quality. In fact, NLB is uniquely placed to offer this content because we're a combined institution: we not only have the public libraries but also the National Library and the National Archives.

We have the capabilities and resources of three different institutions under one roof. This offers us unique opportunities to deliver rich content and

experiences to our patrons. An example is how we have tapped on generative artificial intelligence (Gen AI) to enable our patrons to learn more about S. Rajaratnam through our ChatBook service.<sup>1</sup> This project could never have happened without the foundation laid by years of conscientious archival work: the accumulation of materials, the meticulous documentation of events, the collection of oral history interviews. This project shows the edge that NLB has over social media when it comes to delivering credible and quality services.

More importantly, we are not competing with social media to achieve the same aims. Social media sites are competing with one another to monetise attention. Primarily, they want more eyeballs on their apps. Our primary purpose is different: we want people to discover more and to that end, we want to apply the lessons we learn from social media to make learning more appealing and accessible to all our patrons. If people prefer short-form content such as TikTok videos, we can offer such content, but use them to invite viewers to go deeper; to expand both their breadth and depth of a particular topic.

**How can we make this deeper discovery more appealing to our patrons? As you said, people are increasingly accustomed to the surface-level consumption of content that social media provides. So how can we make deep learning a bigger part of the lives of Singaporeans?**

I believe that we need to meet our patrons where they are if we want to make our collections, programmes, services and the resources we offer a seamless part of their lives. There is, at present, a very clear line

*"Browse-n-Borrow" at West Mall where patrons can explore, flip through and borrow books from a diverse collection of up to 750 titles that are regularly refreshed. Collection of the National Library Board.*



Nodes provide reading and learning experiences beyond the physical libraries. Shown here is the Comics & Games Library at Punggol Coast Mall developed in partnership with JTC and local board games company Origame. The pop-up library features a collection of more than 7,000 comics, game-themed reads, graphic novels and board games. *Collection of the National Library Board.*

between "library spaces" and "non-library spaces", but the libraries of the future ought to blur that line. One way that NLB has tried to do this is with Nodes, which bring library services into spaces that are not traditionally "library spaces", like offices, cafés and even public transport.<sup>2</sup> Beyond that, I think we can also blur these lines within our libraries.

This could involve co-locating with other services or businesses. A natural partner would be cafés, since there is already a strong association between books and coffee. Many of our libraries already have cafés, but there is a clear delineation between the café space and the library space: we can't bring food and drinks from the café into the library, forcing an arbitrary interruption of what could have been a seamless experience of reading over a cup of coffee.

One day we should have a library where the café is not sequestered in one corner but instead occupies a central space in the library, with the ability to serve food and drinks throughout the library space.

The House of Wisdom Library in Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates has a similar concept,<sup>3</sup> where you can even order a coffee at your seat using a QR code.

Another natural partner for us would be bookshops. In Chengdu, I came across a library that was co-located with a bookshop. In fact, it was *inside* the bookshop. The bookshop has newer titles, but only stocks titles that were likely to sell well. On the other hand, the library, since it is a non-commercial entity,

carries a far wider selection of titles, including those with a niche audience. The library and bookshop complement one another, and together provide a better overall service to their visitors.

There are many good ideas from different libraries around the world and NLB is constantly learning and considering what might work in our local context. Specifically in relation to bookshops, I believe that libraries and bookshops are allies in building Singapore's reading and learning ecosystem. Together with writers and publishers, we should join forces to enable the entire ecosystem to thrive. Only then can we make Singapore a reading nation, which is one of our biggest goals as an institution.

Most importantly, we have to keep in mind that public libraries serve a broad swathe of society, and we therefore need to have programmes and services for everyone. We have to be mindful that what works for one group of patrons might not work for another, and we must be attentive to the needs of our different customer segments. This is particularly so when creating experiences. Not every experience will appeal to every user. Nor should they be designed to do so. Instead, we will have to manage this to ensure that within the services we provide, there is something for every patron. This is an important consideration, particularly when making decisions on where best to invest our limited resources.

**Do you feel that there are segments of society that we could work harder to include, or who might not yet see a place for themselves in the library?**

At the moment, the library is seen primarily as a space for the young, so we are working hard to offer services to appeal to working adults as well as seniors. It's especially important to serve our seniors well because Singapore's population is ageing rapidly and we will soon become a super-aged society.

The profile of our seniors is also changing rapidly. Singapore went through a huge and rapid shift in our education system after independence, so the needs of the new generation of seniors are very different from their predecessors. The seniors of today are increasingly looking for new experiences: they travel, seek out educational opportunities and want exciting places where they can spend time without being forced to spend money. We have a lot to offer people at this stage of their lives, such as programmes where they can discover digital technology, workshops that help them develop new skills, and learning communities that will allow them to explore new interests and connect with other seniors.

We are also committed to making our spaces accessible to persons with disabilities. While Singapore has become increasingly inclusive, there are still too few public spaces designed for persons with disabilities – that not only accommodate them but make it possible for them to participate in the same way as any other user, and are built with their needs and desires in mind.

We tried to do so when we built Punggol Regional Library and learnt much from serving persons with disabilities. We now need to extend

**(Below)** Comprising seniors, the Tampines Uke Jammers of the Tampines Regional Library meet on the first and third Fridays of the month. *Collection of the National Library Board.*

**(Below right)** "Borrow-n-Go" on Level 1 of the Punggol Regional Library enables persons with disabilities to borrow books more easily. It is designed as a portal to provide users with a smoother borrowing experience and features a screen positioned at an accessible height for wheelchair users. *Collection of the National Library Board.*



this approach to all our libraries going forward.<sup>4</sup> It is important that anyone who wants to use the library can do so. It's not just a numbers game for us: every patron matters, every segment of the population matters, and that includes persons with disabilities.

**Society can feel increasingly atomised and isolating with the changes brought about by technology and other social forces. What can NLB do to combat this?**

Community building is an important part of the work of the library, both now and in the future. It's important for us to not only provide spaces for people to meet, but also be launchpads for new communities and social groups to form, learn and grow together. I especially love the idea of the community takeover, where people with good ideas can come and use our space to reimagine learning, facilitate community conversations and help build the library that they want to see.

Under LAB25 ("Libraries and Archives Blueprint 2025"), we have tested this idea with corporate partnerships. One example is the collaboration with local furniture stores where they deployed their furniture in our libraries, making our libraries feel more homely. In turn, they benefited from having a wider exposure of their furniture to the public. Such partnerships have the potential to shift the public perception of libraries – our patrons saw us as more welcoming and as a space with possibilities beyond what they'd expect of a traditional library. It helped them see the library as a place where you can do unexpected things.

**What can we do when many of the things that keep people from the library – for instance, long working hours, or a lack of leisure time – are obstacles that are beyond our control?**

We focus on addressing what is within our control. For instance, working adults may not have as much time to come and enjoy our spaces. We can't do



anything about their working hours, but we can make it easier for them to use our resources by offering delivery and reservation services, or by expanding our collection of eResources. We can make our libraries enticing to visit in their limited free time so that they choose to come to us when they *do* have time to spare.

**With all the changes that libraries and archives will face, what do you think is the core value that they will continue to carry into the future?**

I believe that reading, learning and discovery must continue to be our mainstay. Libraries and archives are, and always will be, institutions of reading and learning. No other institution can replicate our roles. But content consumption patterns have changed and will continue to do so. This is why libraries and archives need to transform. We need to stay relevant and be present in the lives of Singaporeans.

**What role can the National Library and the National Archives play in the future, given an environment of information overabundance online and the widespread use of large language models such as ChatGPT?**

Our National Library and National Archives are the collectors, preservers and repositories of Singapore's history. The work that these institutions do in connecting Singaporeans to our past will only become more essential in the future.

Through the tireless work of our librarians and archivists, we have built rich collections that trace our nation's history and culture – and not just in terms of traditional artefacts like documents, photographs and rare books, but also in terms of more innovative and engaging materials like audiovisual recordings, oral histories and social media posts.

These collections are essential resources for the new library experiences we aim to create. The explosion of information online – often muddled with unverifiable and untrue content – has overwhelmed many people and, as a result, has made them hungry for substance and authenticity. While Gen AI services like ChatGPT can help summarise information about an event in Singapore's past, it cannot provide the same experience as encountering a rare photograph of that event, or hearing the real voice of someone who witnessed it, telling their story in their own words.

People today want stories that they know are true, that are documented in enough detail to bring them to life, and that are connected to their personal identities and everyday realities. The resources that the National Library and National Archives have so carefully collected and preserved can offer our patrons all these things and, when brought to life in exciting and interactive ways, provide patrons with not only a fun experience but also a deep and meaningful connection to their nation and its history.



As part of community takeover, the National Library Board partnered with homegrown furniture brands to reimagine reading spaces and offer library patrons a new reading experience. Pictured here is the Jurong West Public Library in partnership with FortyTwo. *Collection of the National Library Board.*

This is part of the natural synergy between the National Archives and National Library, on the one hand, and the Public Libraries, on the other. Public libraries have an extensive community reach and are an integral part of the everyday life of many Singaporeans. Ongoing projects like the National Library's *Singapore Memories – Documenting Our Stories Together* and the National Archives' Citizen Archivist Project engage participants in the work of documenting our nation's history, including contemporary events like the COVID-19 pandemic. Programmes like these blur the lines between library and non-library spaces, as well as the lines between archival work and the everyday work of creating our own personal and shared memories. More importantly, these programmes can help patrons find their place in the Singapore story, and demonstrate to them that their voices and contributions are valued by both NLB and the nation. ♦

**NOTES**

- 1 In 2024, NLB launched the prototype of a generative AI-powered chatbook featuring founding father S. Rajaratnam. It enabled users to learn about his life and contributions to Singapore from content obtained from his authorised biography as well as collections from the National Archives and National Library.
- 2 Nodes are new curated entry points into the National Library Board's wide array of services and collections. They are an extension of learning experiences beyond physical libraries, and aim to bring content and services to wherever people frequent such as shopping malls, community centres, MRT stations, parks and even McDonald's outlets.
- 3 The House of Wisdom, a library and cultural centre, was commissioned in celebration of Sharjah winning the 2019 UNESCO World Book Capital. It is envisioned as a social hub for learning, supported by innovation and technology.
- 4 Punggol Regional Library is equipped with the latest technology and equipment such as multimedia and borrowing stations, accessible keyboards and joysticks, and magnifiers with text-to-speech functions, enabling persons with physical and visual impairments to have easier access to eBooks, audiobooks, eNewspapers and eMagazines. There are also facilities like the Calm Pod and calming corners, which are equipped with sensory kits and toys.

The library section of the Raffles Library and Museum, c. 1910. Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board. Gift of Sam Kai Faye.



Level 11 of the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library at the National Library Building on Victoria Street. Photo by Jimmy Yap.

# From COLONIAL VISION to KEY MEMORY INSTITUTION

## A SHORT HISTORY OF THE NATIONAL LIBRARY

The National Library began life in 1837 with a modest collection of 392 publications belonging to the Singapore Free School.

By Lim Tin Seng

Somewhat remarkably, the idea of the National Library in Singapore can be traced back to 1819. Stamford Raffles, who signed a treaty with Malay rulers that year to establish a trading post on the island, envisioned a college that would educate the sons of the Malay elite as well as employees of the British East India Company. Included in the plan was a library to “collect the scattered literature and traditions of the country, with whatever may illustrate their laws and customs, and to publish and circulate in a correct form the most important of these, with such other works as may be calculated to raise the character of the institution and to be useful or instructive to the people”.<sup>1</sup>

### Sowing the Seed of Knowledge: Raffles’ Vision

It would take another four years before Raffles convened a meeting on 1 April 1823 to establish the college that would become the Singapore Institution (today’s Raffles Institution). Robert Morrison, one of the institution’s founding trustees and

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notable missionary and educationist, reiterated the importance of incorporating a library in the school to facilitate learning and provide “care” for the books in Singapore and the region. He also emphasised that “every possible facility” should be provided to ensure that the library’s collection was accessible and “rendered useful to the settlement”.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, the physical establishment of the library was delayed because the Singapore Institution was only established in December 1837 after the Singapore Free School, an elementary school founded in 1834, relocated from High Street into the intended premises of the Singapore Institution on Bras Basah Road, bringing with it a library.<sup>3</sup> With this move, the Singapore Institution Library was created with a humble collection – just 392 elementary education primers – described as so small it “in all probability [could] be locked into one medium-sized cupboard”.<sup>4</sup>

The collection would soon grow and the library became popular among the users. Although the library was opened to the general public, borrowing privileges were only extended to the institution’s students, teachers, donors and subscribers. Soon, calls were made for the establishment of a proper public library to serve the community beyond the school’s operating hours. Several key residents, including Straits Settlements Governor William J. Butterworth, held a meeting on 13 August 1844 where they passed a resolution for the establishment of such a library. The Singapore Library officially began operations on 22 January 1845.<sup>5</sup>

### The Singapore Library: Singapore’s First Public Library

Although intended to serve a wider community, the Singapore Library, which occupied the “airy and spacious” north wing of the Singapore Institution building, was not a publicly funded institution but a private enterprise funded by its shareholders and three classes of subscribers (Classes II to IV). There was a tiered fee structure ranging from \$1 (Class IV) to \$2.50 (Class II, Class III and shareholders), with shareholders needing to pay an additional \$40 joining fee. The fee determined the borrowing privileges and was subject to the subscriber’s residency in Singapore.<sup>6</sup>

The Singapore Library acquired its titles through appointed book agents as well as second-hand purchases targeting “standard works of science, history, biography, voyages, travels, poetry, fiction, etc”.<sup>7</sup> The library also encouraged the public to donate “works related to the East, and especially the Eastern Archipelago”. Among those who responded was the Periodical Reading Club, which transferred its holdings to the Singapore Library, as well as prominent residents of the day. Today, some of these titles can be found in the National Library’s Rare Materials Collection.<sup>8</sup>

The Singapore Library was initially well received. Described as an “agreeable place of resort... [and] recreation”, it moved to the Town Hall (today’s Victoria Theatre and Concert Hall) in 1862 to make it more accessible.<sup>9</sup> By 1863, however, the library



## The Raffles Library and Museum: The “Q” Collection

The issues faced by the Singapore Library coincided with the colonial government’s consideration of a new museum, an idea influenced by a May 1873 exhibition of colonial products at London’s South Kensington Exhibition Building (now the Victoria and Albert Museum). The Singapore Legislative Council advocated for a similar permanent exhibition on the island to showcase commercial products and artefacts relating to the ethnology, antiquities, natural history and geology of the region.<sup>12</sup>

At the time, there was already a small museum in the Singapore Library to collect artefacts that “illustrate the general history and archaeology of Singapore and the Eastern Archipelago”. The museum was created in 1849 after Governor Butterworth presented the library with two ancient gold coins on behalf of the Temenggong of Johor.<sup>13</sup>

After Andrew Clarke became the new governor in November 1873, he refined the museum proposal to include a public library. The Singapore Library and its collection of books were transferred to the newly formed library, which was administered as a single entity with the museum known as the Raffles Library and Museum.

The library opened in the Town Hall on 14 September 1874, with the focus on collecting “valuable works relating to the Straits Settlements, and surrounding countries, as well as standard works on Botany, Zoology, Mineralogy, Geography, and the Arts and Sciences generally”. The library had three sections – a reference library, a reading room and a lending library – and operated on a two-tier subscription-based model. First-class subscribers paid an annual fee of \$20, or \$5 quarterly, for the privilege of borrowing two complete works and one periodical as well as exclusive access to new books for three months. Second-class subscribers paid \$6 annually, or \$1.50 quarterly, to borrow one complete work and one periodical.

To ensure that “every possible advantage may be placed within the reach of readers in the Settlement”, the library was also opened to non-subscribers but they were not permitted to borrow materials. James Collins, headmaster of the Singapore Institution, was appointed to oversee both the library and museum as librarian and curator.<sup>14</sup>

In 1877, the growing collections of the Raffles Library and Museum necessitated a move to the first and second floors of a new wing of the Singapore Institution, which had been renamed Raffles Institution. But this space soon proved inadequate, prompting the construction of a dedicated building on Stamford Road. This striking neoclassical structure, with its 90-foot (27 m) dome (now home to the National Museum of Singapore), opened on 12 October 1887. It housed the library on the ground floor and the museum on the first floor.<sup>15</sup>

The library’s initial collection consisted of 200 newly purchased books and the 3,000-volume collection from the Singapore Library. Through purchases and donations, the collection grew to over 26,000 volumes by the end of 1900.<sup>16</sup>

While some books were available for lending, others deemed “too valuable for circulation” were housed in the reference library. Some were even locked in “cases with glazed doors” accessible only “for reference on the application to the Librarian”. This collection, known as the “Q” Collection<sup>17</sup> focused on “works related to Singapore, the Straits Settlements, and the Eastern Archipelago”.<sup>18</sup> The “Q” collection also comprised items acquired through purchases and donations from institutions and individuals.<sup>19</sup> (Today, it forms the core of the Rare Materials Collection of the National Library Singapore.)

By 1925, the “Q” collection had increased to about 900 volumes. Throughout the prewar years, it continued to expand with publications received under the Printers and Publishers Ordinance, materials from the library of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society and works from private libraries. Some prized titles obtained during this period include the 1849 lithographed edition of the *Hikayat Abdullah*, the autobiography of the Malay scholar and teacher Abdullah Abdul Kadir.<sup>20</sup> By 1941, the “Q” collection had grown to 1,787 titles, forming a “reasonably complete” collection of works relating to the territories in British Malaya.<sup>21</sup>

In 1938, the library reported that it had nearly 3,600 subscribers and issued over 238,000 book loans, a significant increase from 200 subscribers and 5,000

book loans in 1874. To “induce the younger generation to take an interest in reading”, a Junior Library opened in 1923 for youths aged 10 to 21. By 1940, it had over 6,000 volumes.<sup>22</sup>

During the Japanese Occupation (1942–45), the Raffles Library and Museum was renamed Syonan Tosyokan and Syonan Hakubutsukan respectively. Due to the efforts of the Japanese museum directors and British staff, the collections of the museum and library remained largely intact. By the time the occupation ended, only about 8,000 books, mostly issued to subscribers before the fall of Singapore, were “unaccounted for”.<sup>23</sup>

## The Raffles National Library: Becoming a National Library

The Raffles Library and Museum reopened to the public in December 1945 after the Japanese Occupation. By the end of 1946, subscriptions reached 3,850, with Asiatic members outnumbering European members for the first time. The library also began rebuilding its collection, reaching 70,000 volumes by the end of 1947.<sup>24</sup>

The 1950s saw significant improvements under trained librarians Louise E. Bridges and Leonard M. Harrod. Bridges, Librarian from 1951 to 1952, transformed the library with a limited budget of \$4,000 from a “dim, dingy [place] with cold echoing cement floors” into a place of “wonders”. She introduced comfortable furniture, proper shelving for newspapers and implemented the Dewey Decimal Classification System, bringing order to the previously



(Top) The Town Hall (present-day Victoria Theatre and Concert Hall), 1870. The Raffles Library and Museum opened in the Town Hall on 4 September 1874. Lee Kip Lin Collection, National Library Singapore.

(Above) Rules of the Raffles Library, 8 March 1882. Collection of the National Library Singapore.

faced financial difficulties due to the low subscription rate. An irate patron wrote to the *Straits Times* to complain that the books in the library were “ill-kept, ill-assorted, entirely without any connection or fullness in any division of literature”.<sup>10</sup>

By 1875, the library was saddled with a debt of \$500 due to years of “mismanagement, neglect and a lack of subscribers”. It was described by the *Straits Times* as being in a “moribund condition” with no new books added since 1873.<sup>11</sup>



A seating area at the Raffles Library, 1950s. The card catalogue cabinet is seen in the background. Collection of the National Library Singapore.

“chaotic mess”. Bridges also established a booking system for popular titles, proposed an after-hours book return bin and implemented a fine system for overdue books. The first part-time branch library in the suburbs opened in Upper Serangoon in 1953.<sup>25</sup>

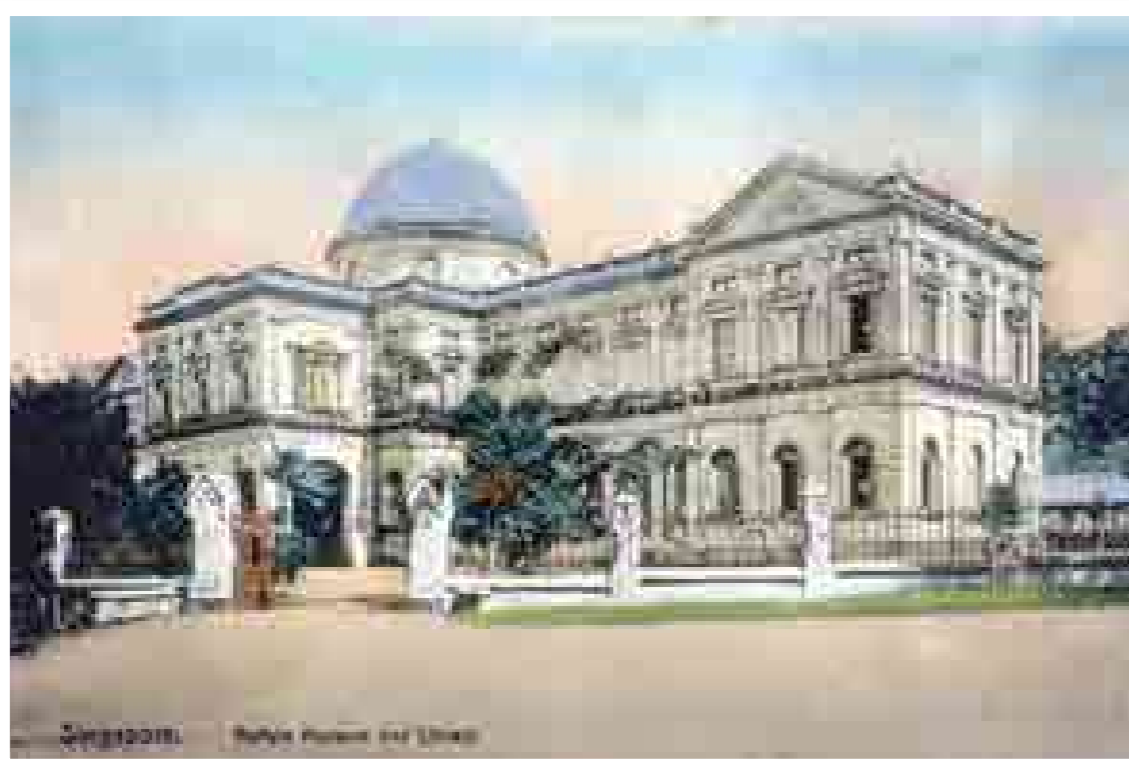
Harrod, who became Librarian in September 1954, expanded the collection to 80,000 volumes by 1955.<sup>26</sup> He initiated an “Oriental” collection featuring books in Chinese, Malay and Tamil, and started a music section with about 4,500 pieces of sheet music, music albums and miniature scores by the end of 1958. Harrod also built more part-time branch libraries in the outlying areas and proposed a mobile library service.<sup>27</sup>

On 1 January 1955, Harrod was appointed Director of the Raffles Library after its administration was separated from that of the Raffles Museum. Plans were also made for the library to move into a new \$2.5-million three-storey building on an adjacent site previously occupied by the St John’s Ambulance Headquarters and the British Council Hall.<sup>28</sup>

The foundation stone of the new building was laid on 16 August 1957 by the businessman and philanthropist Lee Kong Chian, who had donated \$375,000 on the condition that “the library should be made available to the public without charge and that books in the languages commonly spoken in Singapore and in European languages other than English be provided”.<sup>29</sup>

A milestone was reached in 1958 when the Raffles National Library Ordinance came into effect, officially separating the library from the museum,

The Raffles Library and Museum on Stamford Road, 1900s. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



and the Raffles Library was renamed Raffles National Library. It also became a free library where members no longer had to pay a subscription fee, although a \$10 refundable deposit was still required.<sup>30</sup>

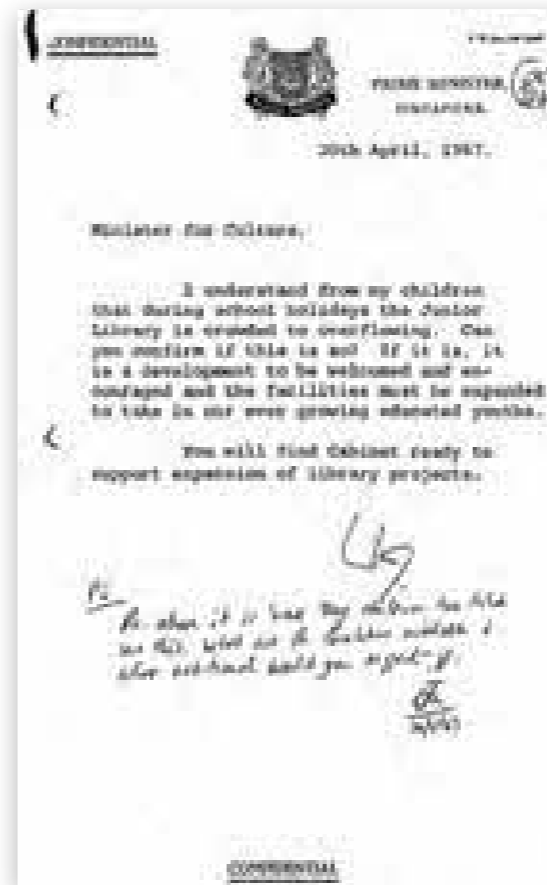
### The National Library: Serving a New Nation

Harrod retired in January 1960 while the new National Library building on Stamford Road was still under construction. Hedwig Anuar, one of the few qualified local librarians, was seconded from the library of the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur to serve as the Raffles National Library’s interim director. She made history by becoming the first Malayan and first woman to head the library.<sup>31</sup>

The new red-brick National Library building on Stamford Road was officially opened on 12 November 1960 by Yang di-Pertuan Negara (Head of State) Yusof Ishak. It accommodated a collection of some 140,000 volumes spread across an Adult Lending Library, a Children’s Library and a Reference Library. The building also included administrative offices, a conference room, lecture halls, as well as storage and maintenance spaces for library and archival materials.

On 9 December 1960, Raffles National Library was renamed the National Library after the Raffles National Library (Change of Name) Ordinance was passed.<sup>32</sup>

Anuar, who returned to the University of Malaya Library in 1961 when her stint as interim director ended, was appointed assistant director (supernumerary) of the National Library in 1962. She succeeded expatriate director Priscilla Taylor in 1965 after the latter



Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew’s letter to the Minister for Culture pledging the government’s support to expand the facilities of the Children’s Library at the National Library, 20 April 1967. From National Archives of Singapore, microfilm no. AR 006.

libraries, contributing to a substantial increase in library membership from approximately 45,000 members in 1960 to over 640,000 members by 1990. Correspondingly, book borrowing surged from 703,000 loans to 9.2 million loans during the same period.<sup>37</sup>

Anuar placed great emphasis on growing the children’s collection and sought to promote services to children. The Children’s Library became so popular that it was usually packed during the school holidays. On 20 April 1967, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew wrote to the Minister for Culture: “I understand from my children that during school holidays the Junior Library is crowded to overflowing. Can you confirm if this is so? If it is, it is a development to be welcomed and encouraged and the facilities must be expanded to take in our ever growing educated youths. You will find Cabinet ready to support expansion of library projects.”<sup>38</sup>

In the 1980s, Anuar led the National Library on its path to computerisation. Book borrowing, book returns and membership registration were computerised, and the Online Public Access Catalogue to search and locate library materials replaced card catalogues.<sup>39</sup>

### The National Library Board: Revolutionising Library Services

In 1992, the Library 2000 Review Committee was convened to conduct a comprehensive review of library services in Singapore. A key outcome of the committee’s report, released in 1994, was the establishment of the National Library Board (NLB) on 1 September 1995 to oversee the development and management of the National Library and public libraries.<sup>40</sup>

With more autonomy and flexibility as a statutory board, NLB embarked on its journey of innovation and service excellence by leveraging new technology. In 1998, NLB became the first library system in the world to pioneer the use of radio frequency identification technology for all library processes and operations. Book borrowing and returning became faster and easier with automated self-check borrowing stations and automated bookdrops.<sup>41</sup>

In tandem with technological advancements, the physical library network was enlarged significantly. New regional libraries in Tampines, Woodlands and Jurong provided expanded collections and services, while smaller branch libraries were strategically co-located with community centres or housed within shopping malls to encourage more visitors to the library. This expansion has resulted in a comprehensive network of 28 public libraries across the island today.<sup>42</sup>

One of the National Library’s main focus areas is the preservation and promotion of Singapore’s literary heritage for future generations. In 2003, it embarked

completed her contract and left in 1964. Over the next two decades, Anuar made significant contributions to the growth and development of the National Library.<sup>33</sup>

In 1963, the National Library’s “Q” Collection made headlines when its bibliography, *Books about Malaysia*, was “hailed in all parts of the world” after it was published.<sup>34</sup> Thereafter, the library received two major donations. The Penang-born merchant Tan Yeok Seong donated his 10,000-volume on Southeast Asian works to the library in 1964. This is now known as the Ya Yin Kwan Collection. One year later, Mrs Loke Yew, mother of film magnate Loke Wan Tho (chairman of the board of the National Library from 1960 until his death in 1964) donated her son’s collection of 1,000 books and journals on Malayan flora, fauna, travel and arts, known today as the Gibson-Hill Collection.

These donations, along with the existing “Q” collection, formed the foundation of the South East Asia (SEA) Room which opened on 28 August 1964. Today, the SEA Collection has evolved into the National Library’s National Collection comprising the Rare Materials Collection, the Singapore and Southeast Asia collections and the Donors’ Collection.<sup>35</sup>

Anuar implemented various initiatives to encourage people to visit the library and to read.<sup>36</sup> She launched the mobile library service, first proposed by Harrod, and set up fulltime branch libraries in housing estates to reach residents in the outlying areas. Queenstown Branch Library was the first to open in 1970. By 1990, there were eight branch



The former National Library building on Stamford Road after an extensive makeover in 1997. *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*

on digitising materials relating to Singapore, including historical newspapers, rare and out-of-print books and digital content. These efforts led to the launch of Web Archive Singapore in 2006 (revamped in 2018) which offers access to archived Singapore websites, and NewspaperSG in 2010, an online resource of more than 200 Singapore and Malaya newspapers published since 1831.<sup>43</sup>

To grow the National Collection, the National Library welcomes donation of materials such as diaries, personal papers, letters, business documents, manuscripts, photographs and architectural plans. To date, it has received over 116,000 items from more than 425 individual donors, organisations and associations.<sup>44</sup>

In November 2012, the National Archives of Singapore – which is the “official custodian of all government records and the people’s collective memory” – became an institution of NLB. Two years later, on 1 January 2014, the Asian Film Archive, a nonprofit organisation established in 2005 to preserve Asian film heritage, became a subsidiary of NLB.<sup>45</sup>

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## Shaping the Future of Learning and Knowledge

Since its establishment, NLB has been guided by a number of blueprints over the last two decades. In 2005, the *Library 2010: Libraries for Life, Knowledge for Success* report was published with the focus on “expanding the role of libraries in the knowledge economy and to developing knowledge-enabled Singaporeans”. In 2011, NLB launched “Libraries for Life” which sought to “ensure that no one in society is left behind in this digital age and that libraries continue to be physical touch-points in the community”.<sup>46</sup>

These strategic plans have led to initiatives that benefit library users and improve NLB’s services and reach. Some examples include the nationwide reading initiative READ! Singapore in 2005, the Singapore Memory Project in 2012 (reconstituted as “Singapore Memories” in 2023) to collect “every individual’s memory and story... to contribute towards the Singapore Story”, the NLB Mobile app in 2014 (revamped in 2021) that provides access to the library’s digital services and collection, and the National Reading Movement in 2016 to promote reading within communities.<sup>47</sup>

NLB’s most recent strategic plan, LAB25, or “Libraries and Archives Blueprint 2025”, was launched in October 2021 to direct NLB’s five-year journey in its next phase of transformation. LAB25 aims to reimagine the libraries and archives of the future and to ensure that they remain vital and relevant in a rapidly evolving digital landscape.<sup>48</sup>

Aligned with this new blueprint, and with augmented reality and artificial intelligence (AI) being the buzzwords these days, NLB has embraced these emerging technologies to revolutionise user experience and improve operational efficiency. An example is the prototype of a generative AI-powered chatbook in 2024 featuring founding father S. Rajaratnam for users to learn about his life and contributions to Singapore, drawing from his authorised biography by former journalist and Member of Parliament Irene Ng as well as collections from the National Archives and National Library.<sup>49</sup>

Today, NLB is a key memory institution dedicated to preserving Singapore’s cultural heritage. As it looks to the future, it will continue to experiment and innovate to serve a new generation of library users. At the same time, NLB’s vision of nurturing readers for life, developing learning communities and creating a knowledgeable nation will remain at the heart of everything it does. ♦

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# Writing the NLB STORY

Established in 1995, the National Library Board was conceived as one of many levers to transform Singapore's economy and culture.

By Hong Xinyi

While the National Library Board was established in 1995, the motivation behind its launch goes back at least to the early 1990s and perhaps even earlier.

In the early 1990s, the faint contours of the present technology-saturated, hyperconnected world came into focus as rudimentary versions of the web browser and website debuted, and the term "information superhighway" started to become popular.

Speaking at a gala dinner for the National Computer Board (NCB) in 1991, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong noted that with the information superhighway emerging, the future was "rushing at us" once more. "Singaporeans have the opportunity to be part of the challenges and rewards of an exciting future," Goh said. "But the cost of the entrance ticket is having to accept constant learning and relearning of new things and constant adapting to new living and working environments."<sup>1</sup>

In Singapore, this work of constant adaptation had in fact started in the 1980s, when the NCB was

formed to implement the computerisation of the civil service, and a national IT plan was formulated. Embracing digitalisation was a means to a larger end – engineering a shift towards a more diversified knowledge-based economy. Over the next two decades or so, a concerted array of public policies would seek to position Singapore as a global hub, orientate manpower training and the education system for a globalised technology-driven world, and unlock the potential of new sectors ranging from research and development (R&D) to the creative industries.

"Why were we doing all this? It was all about reinvention, about making Singapore competitive,"

Minister for Information and the Arts and Minister for Health George Yeo (third from left) touring the exhibition of antique books and other items at the InterContinental Hotel for the launch of the National Library Board's logo and new strategic directions, 1996. With him are Chairman of the National Library Board Dr Tan Chin Nam, Director R. Ramachandran and Assistant Director Lim Kek Hwa. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

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said Dr Tan Chin Nam, the first chairman of the National Library Board (1995–2002). "We had to find new ways of making a living, of staying relevant," he told *BiblioAsia* in an interview in February 2025.<sup>2</sup> During those years, he was on the frontlines of this transformation through his leadership roles at not just the NLB, but also the NCB, Economic Development Board (EDB), Ministry of Manpower, Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts (MITA), and several other agencies and statutory boards. It was a time when many levers in the public sector were created and refined to help engender Singapore's reinvention.

The national library system was one of these levers. After all, the jobs in a knowledge-based economy could only be filled by people who were up to speed with the world's innovations and ready to adapt to and lead change. And the library was all about helping people learn. There was just one problem: this system was not in very good shape.

## Sparks of Inspiration

With roots dating back to 1837, the National Library Singapore had made tremendous strides since its beginnings as a school library within the Singapore Institution (later renamed Raffles Institution).<sup>3</sup> Under

Dr Christopher Chia, first chief executive of the National Library Board, 2025. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*



the dynamic leadership of Hedwig Anuar, its much-beloved director from 1965 to 1988, the network of libraries and membership grew, and the process of computerisation had begun.<sup>4</sup>

But the system was poorly funded. Librarians with a basic bachelor's degree were among the lowest paid in the public service, with small annual salary increments and poor promotion prospects.<sup>5</sup> Facilities and collections were not in great shape: libraries were often cramped, and the average shelf-life of a book was about 11 years, which meant it was not uncommon for books in circulation to show signs of wear and tear.<sup>6</sup>

A 1992 survey found that the public felt the library system was "generally inadequate" in the range and

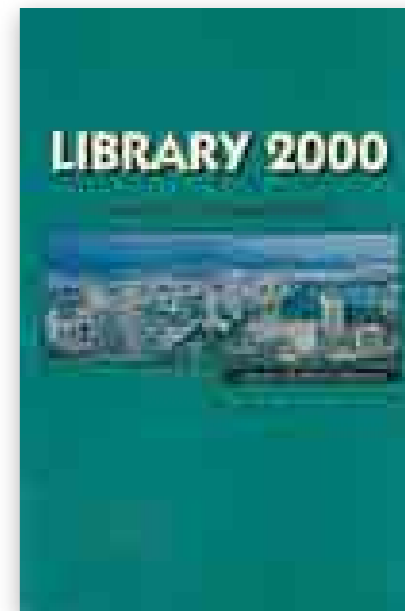
accessibility of its collection, services and facilities. Respondents wanted better classification, more study facilities, and better and more user-friendly computer systems.<sup>7</sup>

By then, change was on the way. In 1990, some divisions within the Ministry of Community Development and the Ministry of Communications and Information were placed within the newly formed MITA, which became the library's parent ministry. A year later, George Yeo, then 37, became the first minister of MITA.

As Yeo pondered the national library system in Singapore against the backdrop of the country's percolating transformation in the 1990s, he felt that it was time to do things differently. At the time, there was a formula, one that was simply repeated – when the population of a part of Singapore reached a certain level, budget would be allocated for a standalone library. Each library would always have a wall dedicated to the photographs of the President and First Lady. Libraries also kept office hours – meaning they were closed when people got off work, and during the weekends.

"It seemed so antiquated and unsuited to our way of life," he recalled in an interview with *BiblioAsia* in January 2025.<sup>8</sup> "People should be able to go to library when they are free. And did we need a shrine to the President and First Lady when space was so precious? I was a young man then, and maybe I was a bit insensitive, but to me, it was ridiculous. And I thought: we had to break the mould."

In 1992, Yeo decided to ask Tan, then the chairman of NCB and managing director of EDB, to head a committee



The Library 2000 Review Committee was convened in 1992 to conduct a comprehensive review of library services in Singapore. *Collection of the National Library Singapore (call no. RSING 027.05957 SIN-[LIB]).*



Director of the National Library Mrs Yoke-Lan Wicks giving Acting Minister for Information and the Arts and Senior Minister of State for Foreign Affairs George Yeo (right) and Permanent Secretary for Information and the Arts Goh Kim Leong (left) a tour of the National Library on Stamford Road, 1990. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

that would examine how to reinvent the library.<sup>9</sup> Tan's familiarity with technology was an obvious strength for reshaping a library system for the internet era. Equally important was the fact that "Chin Nam is good with people", Yeo explained. Changing the library would mean changing its culture, and that would require strong people skills.

Of that first conversation about the library, Tan said of Yeo: "He wanted to challenge conventional wisdom. For instance, he asked: 'Why shouldn't a library be located in a shopping mall?' That question gave me a sense of the mandate – for this reinvention, we could dream of anything, in order to make sure that the library would be able to service its users."

So Tan got to work. Twenty representatives from the public, academic and private sectors were appointed to the Library 2000 Review Committee. Visits to libraries in San Francisco, New York, London, Paris and Shanghai were organised to gather ideas. "Because you must be humble, you have to learn from others," Yeo explained.

The San Francisco Public Library, for instance, was designed for the digital age – users were always no more than a metre away from a plug-in point. That made an impression. Yeo also recalled observing how certain libraries were vibrant event spaces, and how their collections mirrored their communities' and countries' cultural histories.

His longstanding interest in global knowledge arbitrage also influenced the library's eventual transformation. "Singapore is where domains intersect and overlap," Yeo said. Mediating and

translating between these different domains – for instance, as an entrepot servicing traders from the East and West – had been the country's main way of making a living for a long time, and he believed it to be Singapore's most enduring advantage.

The diversity within Singapore had made Singaporeans instinctively skilled at adapting to people from different cultures, he thought. But instinct was not enough. "Arbitrage should be based upon knowledge about these cultures." The library, he felt, could provide this knowledge.

### A Revolutionary Report

The Library 2000 report was released in March 1994. In his memoirs, published in 2024, Yeo described its proposals as "revolutionary".<sup>10</sup>

For a start, there was the report's subtitle – *Investing in a Learning Nation*. "That was the first time the notion of a learning nation, and investing in the learning capacity of the nation, was conceived and presented, which I think is very, very important," said Tan.

The library, he wrote in the report, should be positioned as "an integral part of our national system actively supporting Singapore as a learning nation", helping Singaporeans to learn faster and apply knowledge better than others. "This differential lead in our learning capacity will be crucial to our long-term national competitiveness in the global economy where both nations and firms compete with each other on the basis of information and knowledge," he wrote.

### Recommendations from the Library 2000 Report

The Library 2000 report drew up the roadmap for the Singapore's library system today. Among other things, it proposed that a National Reference Library and Specialised Reference Libraries should be complemented by regional, community and neighbourhood public libraries of varying sizes and differentiated collections and services.

It noted that Singapore's libraries should be linked by computer networks to overseas libraries and databases, and that there should be more emphasis on developing multilingual and regional collections "to serve the needs of the various segments of users in Singapore and to support our regionalisation efforts".

To compete with all the other leisure options out there, libraries should innovate, and learn from other sectors such as retail to create a lively and enjoyable environment. This would help debunk the stereotype that libraries were "old, unfriendly and uninteresting".

Libraries should also build stronger links with businesses and communities. For instance, they could be integrated into cultural, educational and commercial complexes, instead of being housed in standalone buildings.

To accomplish these goals, the report proposed better training, remuneration and career pathways for librarians; adopting new technologies to help users learn, and to expedite the automation of library operations to improve services; and setting up a statutory board to spearhead the implementation of the report's recommendations and to realise its vision of transformation for the library.

In March 1995, Yeo elaborated on this transformation in a speech at the Digital Libraries Conference. The library would develop along the twin tracks of technology and culture, he said.<sup>11</sup>



Dr Tan Chin Nam, first chairman of the National Library Board, 2025. Photo by Jimmy Yap.

The importance of technology was perhaps more self-evident – by then, internet terminals were starting to appear in libraries here. But culture was no less essential. It was culture that "regulates the way human beings cooperate and compete", he said. "Throughout history, public libraries have not only been repositories of information, they have also been temples of culture... We need access to all sources of knowledge. What we want is to make Singapore a hub for knowledge arbitrage. But we also want to preserve our sense of self and family which is why there must always be a cultural emphasis to all that we do."

### Translating Theory into Practice

About six months after Yeo's speech, the National Library Board (NLB) was formed as a statutory board on 1 September 1995. This structure meant that it had more discretion in financial and human resource matters, such as market-based salaries.<sup>12</sup>

Tan was appointed its chairman, and he recruited Dr Christopher Chia, a colleague from his NCB days, as its chief executive. Chia used to head the NCB's R&D arm. "So I got him involved with the expectation that we would be able to inject a lot of IT expertise into the transformation of the library," said Tan.

At that point, Chia was in the private sector and had spent just 10 months in his new job.<sup>13</sup> He decided to return to the public sector for two reasons. First, he was very fond of the library. "I must have gone through the entire collection of the national library's fairy tales, mysteries and fantasies when I was a child," he told *BiblioAsia* in January 2025.<sup>14</sup> It also felt like an opportunity to continue his previous work in promoting the wider adoption of technology, now in another way through the library.

Chia's first order of business was to secure a budget for Library 2000's ambitious proposals. "A plan is only as good as its implementation, right? So we spent up to a year translating the Library 2000 plan into a set of tangible outcomes, in order to get funding support."

He set ambitious targets as well, aiming for three times the number of loans, visitorship and membership within the next five years. "If you want an increase by 5 percent, you don't need me. That will happen anyway," he explained. "But we wanted to do something significant, so we offered those numbers. Because when you go to the Finance Ministry, if you just say, I want to grow something, but you don't offer a significant outcome, you're not going to get anywhere."

It worked and the purse-strings loosened. In 1996, it was announced that NLB would spend over S\$1 billion over the next eight years on its facilities, collections and staff training.<sup>15</sup> It was not a huge sum in the larger scheme of things, but it was a notable move at a time when many countries were cutting their investments in libraries.<sup>16</sup>

With funding secured, actual change got underway, and rapid prototyping became a key strategy for introducing innovations.

Although at the time it had already been decided that the National Library building on Stamford Road would be demolished, it had a lively last chapter.



The courtyard at the former National Library on Stamford Road, 2004. Music performances, wellness talks and other cultural events were held there. Collection of the National Library Singapore.

Between 1998 and its eventual demolition in 2005, it was used as a testbed for new ideas, many of which were later replicated in new libraries. These included a café, live music performances and talks on topics ranging from health to life sciences.

Planning for new libraries was professionalised with the setting up of a properties team, whose members developed expertise in working with architects and interior designers, and optimising the placement of new features such as checkout machines. New standards for operations and frontline customer service were established, and customer service training and more objective staff evaluation criteria were introduced.<sup>17</sup>

Getting the librarians to accept change, however, was not easy. Few people like change, especially radical change. Fortunately, the responsibility of bridging the old ways with the new landed on the shoulders of R. Ramchandran. Known as Rama to the staff, he was the first director of the National Library after NLB was formed. In many ways, he was the ideal person to be the bridge because he was a dyed-in-the-wool librarian himself. He had joined the National Library back in 1969 as a library officer, and had risen to be the deputy director of its reference and support services when he was appointed to the Library 2000 committee in 1992. (He eventually retired as NLB's deputy chief executive in 2004.)<sup>18</sup>

"Many new hires from the technology sector joined NLB in the 1990s," Rama told *BiblioAsia* in February 2025.<sup>19</sup> Newbies and the long-serving librarians had to get used to one another, and they did, eventually. He took on the role of interfacing – arbitrating, you might say – between the librarians and the senior management.

"I learned a lot of things from the new people too, like public relations, and how to bring in new ideas," he said. The new services and events he helped to introduce included an electronic reference service for remote library users, and the Asian Children's Festival.

To reassure staff during this time of change, the management said there would be no retrenchments. Job scopes were redefined and enlarged, and staff also got new uniforms, salary raises, business cards,

improved workspaces as well as emails and computer access. "These enhancements went down well with librarians," said Rama.

He added that Chia was able to strike a balance between "not rocking the boat" and being honest with librarians about the need for change. There were many communication sessions and opportunities for staff to have their voices heard. For instance, during the first year of NLB's existence, 65 percent of the 3,337 suggestions from the staff suggestion scheme were implemented. Chia visited one to two branches every week to get a better sense of how things were on the ground. By 1998, the attrition rate was close to zero.<sup>20</sup>

"I have discovered when you have a vision, you have to also make sure that there'll be buy-in of that vision," said Tan of his approach to change management. "So I think is a very important to have stakeholder engagement. You have to respect the incumbents. You have to provide capacity development, new training, so that everybody can work together and be part of the journey of co-creating new value."

Resistance to change also ebbed when staff started seeing the tangible results of new ideas. The switch away from the tedious and time-consuming manual processing of library books was one example. Chia and his team collaborated with a local company to come up with a system where radio frequency identification was used to automate the check-out and returning of books. The first prototype was rolled out at the Bukit Batok Community Library, which opened in November 1998. "It worked beautifully," said Chia. "When staff from other branches started asking 'when is our turn?', I knew that we had turned a corner."

## A Lasting Impact

By 2001, visitorship had quadrupled, the collection had tripled in size, and membership and the library physical space had doubled. The loan rate also increased from 10 to 25 million books, and time spent in queues was reduced from an hour to 15 mins.<sup>21</sup> That year, the NLB was featured in a case study by the Harvard Business School. Case studies of real-world organisations that illustrate business concepts in action form the backbone of the curriculum at this institution.<sup>22</sup>

Today, the effects of the Library 2000 recommendations can clearly be seen as many of the proposals were implemented – from a network of libraries of different sizes, to libraries with vibrant designs and tech-aided services that are embedded within shopping malls.

The NLB has constantly sought to reinvent itself with more strategic plans. In 2005, there was the *Library 2010: Libraries for Life, Knowledge for Success* report. This was followed by "Libraries for Life" in 2011 and the latest, LAB25 ("Libraries and Archives Blueprint 2025"), in 2021.

And that journey of change and transformation, for both the library and Singapore, is far from over. Singaporeans are still buffeted by great changes – new technologies such as artificial intelligence

are reshaping the world, and information has long been at everyone's fingertips, thanks to ubiquitous digital devices. How should the library approach its mission of helping people learn today?

"I was in Huawei's Dongguan campus recently, where they have a magnificent European-style library," Yeo replied when asked this question. "The idea behind it is to inspire Huawei's staff. Bookshops are governed by the bottom line. But a public library can go beyond that." A technology-saturated, hyperconnected world is frenetic; the library can be a space for calm and reflection, he believed. "It can be a place where people can take a step back and see things against the sweep of history and geography. And once you realise how little you know, you become more humble, and less quick to judge and criticise."

For Tan, leaning into the function of the library as a social space may be a good path forward. "Human beings are social animals, right? We are very fortunate because the library is very much part of our social fabric, and I think as NLB continues to innovate, it will continue to perform a very important role in continuous learning." ♦

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## THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES JOINS NLB

When the National Archives of Singapore became part of the National Library Board in 2012, it was, in many ways, a homecoming. The archives had begun life in the late 1930s as part of the old Raffles Library and Museum, the predecessor institution of the National Library.

The history of the archives in Singapore dates back to 1938 with the appointment of Tan Soo Chye as the first Archivist to manage the historical records of the archives unit at the Raffles Library and Museum.

In January 1955, the administration of the Raffles Library was separated from that of the Raffles Museum and the archives unit came under the Raffles Library. (The Raffles Library was renamed Raffles National Library in 1958 and then the National Library in 1960).

The archives unit became a separate unit – the National Archives and Records Centre (NARC) – in August 1968. The newly established unit took over the management, custody and preservation of public archives and government records from the National Library. Hedwig Anuar, the director of the National Library, was concurrently appointed the first director of the NARC.

Two years later, in January 1970, the NARC moved into its own premises at 17–18 Lewin Terrace on Fort Canning Hill.

The NARC was expanded in 1979 when the Oral History Unit was set up as a department under the NARC. The mission of the Oral History Unit was to collect and document the memories of people through oral history recordings. In 1981, the NARC was renamed the Archives and Oral History Department following the merger of the Oral History Unit with the NARC.

In May 1984, the Archives and Oral History Department relocated to the Old Hill Street Police Station, sharing the space with several government agencies. The new premises had better facilities such as a bigger climate-controlled archival repository. Just a year later, the Archives and Oral History Department was split into the National Archives and the Oral History Department.

In August 1993, the National Archives, the Oral History Department and the National Museum became part of the National Heritage Board. The National Archives and the Oral History Department became a single entity known as the National Archives of Singapore, and the Oral History Department was renamed the Oral History Centre.

In 1997, the National Archives of Singapore moved into the former Anglo-Chinese Primary School building at 1 Canning Rise, where it remains to this day. Finally, in November 2012, the National Archives of Singapore became an institution of the National Library Board.



The National Archives of Singapore building at Canning Rise. Collection of the National Library Board.

# KUNG TIAN CHENG

## First Clerk of Raffles Library

In the late 19th century, Kung Tian Cheng helped compile a complete catalogue of the Raffles Library, before going to China to work for President Yuan Shikai.

By Bonny Tan

In 1905, the Raffles Library (predecessor to the National Library Singapore) published a 636-page book titled *Catalogue of the Raffles Library, Singapore 1900*.<sup>1</sup> The massive tome reflected the library's holdings of more than 26,000 volumes, an almost 10-fold increase from 30 years prior.

Curator-Librarian Karl Richard Hanitsch emphasised that the compilation of the catalogue “entailed much extra work on the Library staff” and singled out one person in particular: “I must especially acknowledge the excellent work of the First Clerk, Mr. Kong Tian Cheng, whose assistance alone has made the issue of the catalogue possible.”<sup>2</sup>

After making his mark at the Raffles Library, Kung headed for revolutionary China in the 1910s where, among other things, he was the biographer and librarian for Yuan Shikai, the first official president of the Republic of China. Such was his fame that Kung merited a write-up in Song Ong Siang's tome, *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore*, first published in 1923.<sup>3</sup>

A descendant of Confucius, Kung was born in Melaka on 17 June 1879. His father, Kung Chow Ching, moved to Melaka from Yantai (Zhifu), Shandong, in 1876. Kung's father died a few years after the boy was born and the widowed mother moved to Singapore where she was able to enrol both Kung and his elder brother, Kung Tian Siong, at the newly opened Anglo-Chinese School on Coleman Street.

After completing his education in 1895, Kung, then 16, joined the Raffles Library as a Junior Clerk. At the library, Kung was tasked to assist Hanitsch in putting together the Raffles Library catalogue of its complete holdings – a momentous project that involved scrutinising decades worth of past catalogues and carefully taking stock of existing holdings.<sup>4</sup>

In April 1897, Kung was promoted to First Clerk and his salary was raised from a monthly \$15 to \$25.<sup>5</sup> He began work on the catalogue in September 1898, which was completed seven years later and published as the *Catalogue of the Raffles Library Singapore 1900* in November 1905. It is one of the most massive catalogues compiled by the Raffles Library and

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includes the titles from the Logan and Rost collections acquired in 1880 and 1897 respectively.<sup>6</sup>

Concurrently, Kung collated the *Catalogue of Literature Relating to China Contained in the Raffles Library* at the request of Lim Boon Keng, a prominent member of the Straits Chinese community and a Raffles Library committee member.<sup>7</sup> This listing focused on works about China held in the Raffles Library and was published as a supplement to one of the library's catalogues.

In between these projects, the fluently bilingual Kung saw better prospects as an interpreter, at double his salary, working as First Clerk at the Chinese Protectorate in Penang.<sup>8</sup> Recently married to Pang Ah Kang, he left the Raffles Library in early 1900 but the overloaded Hanitsch could not do without his competent First Clerk.<sup>9</sup>

Hanitsch noted that in compiling the catalogues, Kung had “obtained a most thorough knowledge of the Library”.<sup>10</sup> He sought to have Kung's salary raised to \$75 a month, which brought Kung back to the Raffles Library in July 1900 as First Clerk. During Hanitsch's sabbatical between March 1901 and March 1902, Kung covered Hanitsch's role as Curator-Librarian until Hanitsch's return.<sup>11</sup>

Kung was also active in several other institutions, both as a librarian and as a writer. He wrote for the *Straits Chinese Magazine*, edited by Song Ong Siang and Lim Boon Keng, which served as a platform for articulating the complex identity of the Straits Chinese caught between local and overseas politics.<sup>12</sup>

Kung first released the *Catalogue of Literature Relating to China* in instalments in this magazine between September 1899 and the end of 1900. He also volunteered as a Librarian at the Chinese Christian Association from 1898 through to 1905.<sup>13</sup>

Kung resigned from the Raffles Library on 8 April 1906, purportedly to move into business.<sup>14</sup> By 1907, Kung had been appointed guardian and teacher of the sons of Yau Tet Shin, a mining tycoon and famed town builder of Ipoh.<sup>15</sup> Kung decided to relocate to India where his young charges were studying. Upon



The Kung family, 1899, Singapore. Kung Tian Cheng is standing on the extreme left and his wife Pang Ah Kang is seated at the extreme left. His mother Mrs Kung Chow Ching is seated in the centre with daughters Ah Yin (later Marie-Therese Wong) to her right, Ah Chow to her left and Cheng Neo behind. Standing on the right is his brother Kung Tian Siong and his brother's wife Siauw Mah Lee is seated at the extreme right. Irene Lim Family Collection, National Library Singapore.

the completion of their studies in India, Yau's sons returned to Ipoh via Penang in late 1910.<sup>16</sup> Kung and his brother headed to China after this.

Throughout his travels in China, Kung would continue to remember the Raffles Library and Museum through donations of rare books, unusual coins and figurines collected from China.<sup>17</sup>

While in China, Kung became the editor of the Shanghai-based English weekly, the *Republican Advocate*, in 1912, and the *Peking Daily News* the subsequent year.<sup>18</sup> He was also involved in negotiations between the north and south of China alongside Peace Commissioners during the tumultuous years of 1911 and 1912. In 1913, the *Straits Times* noted that it was “an open secret that he carried his life in his hand when he was discharging these self-imposed duties”.<sup>19</sup>

In 1914, Kung was appointed Chief Librarian of Yuan Shikai's Presidential Library and began writing a biography of Yuan. However, before he could complete the work, Kung contracted smallpox. He died in China on 19 January 1915, five months short of his 36th birthday, leaving behind his wife and three children.<sup>20</sup> ♦

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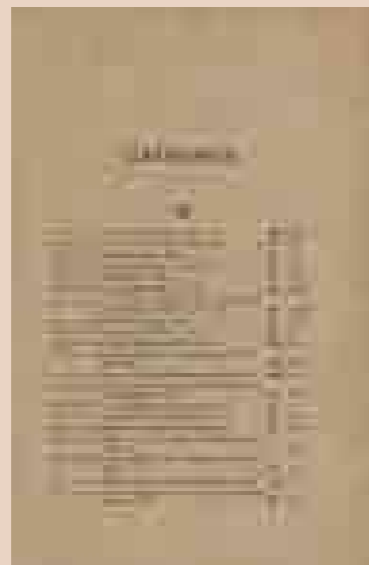
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(Above) An undated portrait of Kung Tian Cheng. Image reproduced from Song Ong Siang, *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore* (London: John Murray, 1923), 511. Collection of the National Library Singapore (call no. RRARE 959.57 SON).

(Right) The title page and first page of the *Catalogue of the Raffles Library, Singapore 1900*, published in 1905. Images reproduced from Raffles Library and Museum, *Catalogue of the Raffles Library, Singapore 1900* (Singapore: American Mission Press, 1905). Collection of the National Library Singapore (National Library Online).



# Lady in Red

## The Former National Library on Stamford Road

Beyond being a mere repository of books, the library on Stamford Road was a place for acquiring knowledge, making memories and creating friendships.

By Lim Tin Seng

The National Library on Stamford Road, 1973. Collection of the National Library Singapore.



**Lim Tin Seng** is a Senior Librarian with the National Library Singapore. He is the co-editor of *Roots: Tracing Family Histories – A Resource Guide* (2013), *Harmony and Development: ASEAN-China Relations* (2009) and *China's New Social Policy: Initiatives for a Harmonious Society* (2010). He writes regularly for *BiblioAsia*.

**T**he former National Library building on Stamford Road, which opened in 1960, became a beloved landmark in the area thanks to its striking red-brick facade and distinctive modern architecture. This photo essay revisits the history and legacy of the building.

### Unveiling a Literary Haven

The National Library on Stamford Road was officially inaugurated on 12 November 1960 by Yang di-Pertuan Negara (Head of State) Yusof Ishak. In his speech, he said the new library would “serve the needs of nation-building and its departments of knowledge learning, and technology embraced a wide field”. He encouraged people to visit the library noting that it “is available for free use of all citizens of Singapore, and it is financed entirely from public funds. I call upon the people of Singapore to use this National Library of theirs as fully as possible”.<sup>1</sup> It was reported that “[i]ncessant hordes of people [were] milling about the library grounds on that auspicious day”, all of them curious to see the new library.<sup>2</sup>

### A Philanthropist's Donation

In 1953, businessman and philanthropist Lee Kong Chian donated \$375,000 towards the building of the library. His contribution, which came with the

**(Above right)** Guests mingling during the National Library's opening, 12 November 1960. Collection of the National Library Singapore.

**(Right)** An artist's impression of the National Library building on Stamford Road, 1950s. Collection of the National Library Singapore.



stipulation that the library remain public and free for all, helped fund the construction on a site previously occupied by the St John's Ambulance Headquarters and British Council Hall. Lee himself laid the foundation stone on 16 August 1957 and the total cost to construct the National Library – including land, construction and furnishings – was estimated at \$2.5 million.<sup>3</sup> (Prior to this, the library was located in the building that is now the National Museum of Singapore.)



## A Symphony in Red Brick

At its opening, the National Library featured a distinctive T-shaped block layout, spanning approximately 101,500 sq ft (9,430 sq m). Designed by Lionel Bintley of the Public Works Department, the building housed a wide range of facilities, including a lending library, a reference library, study spaces, lecture halls, conference rooms, storage areas for books, administrative offices, technical service workrooms and an open-air courtyard.



**(Right)** The public reading area in the Adult Section of the National Library as seen from the second floor, 1960s. *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*

**(Below)** The same view of the Adult Section from the second floor, 1970s. The additional shelves and card catalogue cabinets in the 1970s is an indication that the library's collection had expanded. *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*



**(Top left)** The contrasting architecture between the National Museum (left) and the National Library (right) is captured in this photograph, 1980s. *Akitek Tenggara Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

**(Left)** Children queuing to borrow books at the information counter in the Children's Section, 1970s. *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*

**(Above)** A library user using a microfilm reader, 1960s. *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*

such as “a monstrous monument”, “haphazard”, “clumsy”, “heavy” and “lacks basic discipline” to describe the building.<sup>4</sup>

## A Place for All

The National Library offered a wide array of collections and services. The public lending library included separate sections for adult and children's books as well as facilities for activities, while the reference library housed the South East Asia Collection.

With a seating capacity of more than 400, visitors also had access to equipment like microfilm readers to read old newspapers. Over time, the library's facilities were upgraded. Air-conditioning was added and the collections also expanded significantly, particularly in the Chinese, Malay and Tamil sections, and from materials gifted by donors.<sup>5</sup>





### A Treasure Trove

On 28 August 1964, the South East Asia Room at the National Library opened as a dedicated space “devoted solely to the study of South East Asia”. This specialised room housed a large collection of materials on Singapore and the region that the library had accumulated since its establishment in 1837.<sup>6</sup>

Minister for Culture S. Rajaratnam, who officiated its opening, described the room as “beyond price” and “absolutely unattainable from any other source”. “From the closed stacks at the back of the building our librarians have now brought out this famous collection,” he said in his speech. “In this room this afternoon you will be able to see copies

of letters written by Raffles, the first newspaper published in Singapore, or you can check reports on land costs a hundred years ago, or complaints on the behaviour of some of the civil servants of the time.”<sup>7</sup>

The materials included the 10,000-volume Ya Yin Kwan Collection covering diverse subjects with a focus on the Chinese in Southeast Asia, Reinhold Rost’s 970-volume philological and scientific collection featuring Eastern languages and Malay Archipelago studies, the 1,000-volume Gibson-Hill Collection on Malayan flora, fauna, travel histories and arts, and James Richardson Logan’s 1,250-strong collection of ethnography and philological works on the Malay Archipelago, among others. Today, these collections form part of the National Library’s National Collection.<sup>8</sup>

### Nurturing Minds and Fostering Community Spirit

The National Library also served as a vibrant community hub (and still does) to engage people from all walks of life. It hosted library tours, concerts, drama performances, storytelling sessions, book discussions, exhibitions, reading campaigns, meet-the-author sessions, book festivals and talks. These initiatives aimed to promote reading and learning while fostering a deep connection with the public.

**(Top)** The Reference Room at the National Library, 1964. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

**(Left)** Before computerisation, users searched for library materials at the National Library using card catalogues, 1960s. *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*



**(Above)** The information counter of the National Library, 1960s. *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*

**(Above right)** Helping a reader with enquiries at the National Library, 1970s. *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*

**(Bottom)** A storytelling session at the National Library, 1960s. *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*



cataloguing, compiling the national bibliography, and undertaking conservation and preservation work like microfilming and book repairs.

### A New Chapter

In March 1997, the National Library underwent a six-month extensive makeover costing \$2.6 million. When it reopened in October that year, its facade had been updated with glass partitions and its interior replaced with carpeted floors.

A new Singapore Resource Centre was set up to replace the South East Asia Room, while the lending library was renamed the Central Community Library and furnished with a new information counter as well as new shelves and study tables.

### Unsung Heroes of Stamford Road

The National Library owed much of its success and impact to its staff. At the reference counters, the staff addressed public enquiries, providing guidance and expertise. In later years, the library would accept queries by mail and the telephone, and subsequently email.

Behind the scenes, countless library staff handled essential duties such as acquiring new materials,





The long snaking queues became a thing of the past as self-check machines and an automated bookdrop allowed patrons to borrow and return books with greater convenience. Computer stations with Internet access were also added to aid the discovery of new information and library materials.<sup>9</sup>

The 300-square-metre courtyard of the National Library also underwent a transformation. After upgrading works, the courtyard was repurposed as a public space to “promote the library as a vibrant place and as a venue for creative expressions like poetry,

(Above) A musical performance at the courtyard to celebrate the Lunar New Year, 2000. *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*

(Below) The foyer of the revamped National Library with the self-check borrowing stations, 1997. The St Andrew’s Cross on the floor at the entrance is now located outside the National Library Building on Victoria Street. *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*

readings, drama or dance performances, or forum discussions on an art topic,” said Lim Siew Kim, deputy director of the National Reference Library. The addition of a fountain and a café enhanced the ambience and further improved library user experience.<sup>10</sup>

### From Stamford Road to Victoria Street

In 1998, it was announced that the National Library would be demolished to make way for the Singapore Management University and the construction of Fort Canning Tunnel. The Preservation of Monuments Board (now Preservation of Sites and Monuments), which evaluated the building, found that it did not “possess sufficient merit to be accorded the status of a gazetted national monument”.

The decision sparked public calls to preserve the building. However, the demolition plan went ahead, citing the need for better land use in the area and to alleviate traffic congestion.

The National Library closed its doors on 1 April 2004 before reopening on 12 November 2005 at its current state-of-the-art premises on Victoria Street.<sup>11</sup>

Although the National Library building on Stamford Road no longer exists, its entrance pillars are preserved within the grounds of the Singapore Management University. Some of the red bricks were salvaged and utilised for the construction of the wall of the garden at the Basement 1 Central Public Library in the new building. The St Andrew’s Cross – a geometric floor pattern consisting of four adjoining crosses – that used to adorn the floor of the entrance at the Stamford Road building was moved to a space outside the new building.<sup>12</sup>

Its literary heritage lives on in the National Collection at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library within the new building. Additionally, the stories and memories of users and patrons of the former National Library have been recorded in publications and in oral history interviews with the National Archives of Singapore. These efforts will ensure that the legacy of the red-brick building will not be lost to future generations.<sup>13</sup> ♦

*Note: For more photos of the former National Library on Stamford Road, visit [biblioasia.nlb.gov.sg](http://biblioasia.nlb.gov.sg).*



Bricks from the former National Library were used for the wall in the garden of the Central Public Library, 2025. The bronze sculpture of the girl reading is by Singaporean sculptor Chong Fah Cheong. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

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The Singapore and Southeast Asia Collection on Level 11 of the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library, National Library Building. Photo by Jimmy Yap.

# THE SINGAPORE AND SOUTHEAST ASIA COLLECTION

An invaluable resource for researchers of Singapore and the region.

By Ang Seow Leng

**Ang Seow Leng** is a Senior Librarian with the National Library Singapore. Her responsibilities include managing the Singapore and Southeast Asia Collection, developing content as well as providing reference and research services relating to Singapore and Southeast Asia.

First time visitors to Level 11 of the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library at the National Library Building are typically wowed by the space: from the floor-to-ceiling windows offering a spectacular view of the Singapore skyline to the triple-volume floor with a six-metre-high book wall. But the gorgeous view and the high ceilings pale in comparison to what is on the bookshelves on this floor. Level 11 is the home of the Singapore and Southeast Asia Collection – a valuable source of materials for historical research and discovery into topics relating to Singapore and the region.

The Singapore and Southeast Asia Collection, together with the Rare Materials Collection, the Legal Deposit Collection and the Donors' Collection, form the National Collection of almost 2 million items at the National Library Singapore.

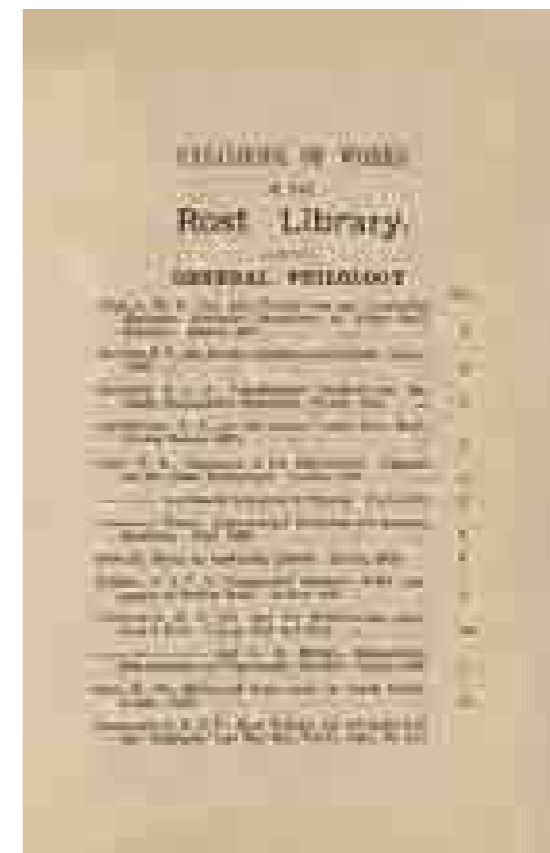
## The Early Years of the Singapore and Southeast Asia Collection

The National Library has its beginnings as the Singapore Institution Library, which was established in 1837 with just 392 elementary education primers.<sup>1</sup>

In 1845, the Singapore Institution Library was renamed the Singapore Library. By 1874, with a collection of 3,000 volumes, the Singapore Library became a part of the museum. The new entity was called the Raffles Library and Museum, and its objective was to collect “valuable works relating to the Straits Settlements, and surrounding countries, as well as standard works on Botany, Zoology, Mineralogy, Geography, and the Arts and Sciences generally.”<sup>2</sup>

Early acquisitions include the 1879 purchase of the Logan Philological Library belonging to James Richardson Logan, the founder and well-known editor of the *Journal of the Indian Archipelago and Eastern Asia* (popularly known as Logan's Journal). This consisted of 1,250 works on the ethnography and philology of the Malay Archipelago.<sup>3</sup> The Rost Collection was acquired in 1897 from a portion of the private library of Reinhold Rost, the librarian at the India Office Library in London. The 970-volume collection comprises titles relating to the philology, geography and ethnology of the Malay Archipelago.<sup>4</sup>

The library's collection grew steadily and by the end of 1900, there were more than 26,000 volumes.<sup>5</sup> The appointment of qualified librarian James Johnston in 1920 to manage the Raffles Library was a landmark in the library's history. He was instrumental in organising works on Malaya and the surrounding islands into a special Malaysia Collection in 1924. The library's collection continued



The *Catalogue of the Rost Collection in the Raffles Library, Singapore* was published by the American Mission Press in Singapore in 1897. Collection of the National Library Singapore (call no. RRARE 016.49 RAF).

to grow and gain traction from there.<sup>6</sup> In 1923, the library of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society was transferred “on permanent loan” to the Raffles Library as the society's council felt that it would “receive more attention and care in the larger library.”<sup>7</sup>

The move back to the Raffles Institution building in 1876 presented an opportunity to reclassify the growing collection. The simple six-genre arrangement was expanded into 24 subjects, each represented by a letter of the English alphabet. The letter “Q”, for instance, was given to “Works on Singapore, the Straits Settlements and the Eastern Archipelago.”<sup>8</sup>

Fortunately, the Japanese Occupation (1942–45) did not do much damage to the collections of the museum and library. After the war, the library focused on rebuilding its collection which increased to 70,000 volumes by 1947. This figure reached 80,000 volumes by 1955.<sup>9</sup>

In 1955, the Raffles Library and Museum was separated into two entities and plans were also made for the library to have its own separate building next door.<sup>10</sup> Raffles Library was renamed Raffles National Library in 1958 after the Raffles National Library Ordinance took effect. It moved into its new premises in November 1960 and a month later, the Raffles National Library became officially known as the National Library.<sup>11</sup>



(Above and right) All titles in the Ya Yin Kwan Collection bear this donation label as well as the stamp in red which says Ya Yin Kwan in Chinese (椰荫馆). *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*

(Far right) Tan Yeok Seong (1903–84). *Courtesy of his son, Alex Tan Tiong Tee.*

### Opening of the South East Asia Room

One of the more important additions to the library's collection in the early postwar years is the Ya Yin Kwan (Palm Shade Pavilion) Collection, donated by Tan Yeok Seong (1903–84), the founder of Nanyang Book Company. A historian and collector of books and historical artefacts, Tan devoted his life and time researching Southeast Asian history, especially the influence of the Chinese in Southeast Asia.

In 1964, Tan donated his collection to the National Library with the condition that a South East Asia Room (SEA Room) be set up to house the collection and make it accessible to the public. His wish was for the donation to be a catalyst for more donations and for the National Library to become a centre for Southeast Asian studies.<sup>12</sup> Since the majority of the publications about this region in the early 19th and 20th centuries were mainly by Europeans, Tan hoped for more Southeast Asian scholars to write their own history.

The SEA Room was officially opened on 28 August 1964, with Culture Minister S. Rajaratnam

as the guest of honour. "Today's occasion is one that makes Singaporeans and Malaysians proud," said Rajaratnam. "From the closed stacks at the back of the building our librarians have now brought out this famous collection."<sup>13</sup>

In June 1965, the Singapore and Southeast Asia Collection was further enriched by Mrs Loke Yew's donation of books and journals originally from the personal library of the late Carl Alexander Gibson-Hill (curator at the Raffles Museum and editor of the *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*). Mrs Loke Yew was the mother of Loke Wan Tho, the chairman of the board of the National Library from 1960 until his death in 1964.<sup>14</sup>

"I welcome this opportunity of fulfilling my son's intention, thereby not only perpetuating the memory and names of these two close friends (Dato Loke and the late Dr Gibson-Hill) but also providing a source of knowledge for many young men in the years that lie ahead," said Mrs Loke Yew at the presentation ceremony.

The SEA room gave prominence and importance to works on Southeast Asia, including titles relating to Singapore. The Gibson-Hill, Logan and Rost collections were housed in the SEA Room, along with materials on Malaysia, Burma (now Myanmar), Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Brunei, Indonesia and the Philippines.<sup>15</sup>

In the ensuing decades, the National Library continued to add rare and important Singapore and Southeast Asian materials, either through purchase or from donations. The current strengths

Mrs Loke Yew with Minister for Culture S. Rajaratnam and Director of the National Library Hedwig Anuar at the presentation of the Carl Alexander Gibson-Hill Collection to the National Library, 1965. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

of the National Library's collections and services on Southeast Asia owe much to the farsighted policies during this period of the 1960s.

In 1997, the National Library on Stamford Road underwent an extensive six-month makeover. When it reopened in October that year, the SEA Room had been converted into the Singapore Resource Centre, which was publicly accessible.

Part of the collection from the SEA Room was recategorised as the Singapore Collection and placed in the Singapore Resource Centre, while the rare and valuable materials were moved into a new space called the Heritage Room that was not accessible to the public. (The Heritage Room's collection is now the Rare Materials Collection at the National Library Building on Victoria Street.)<sup>16</sup>

### Growing the Singapore and Southeast Asia Collection

The early acquisitions, donations and titles from the Singapore Library form part of the Rare Materials Collection today. The collection covers language and literature, religion, history and geography, focusing on Singapore and Southeast Asia from the 15th to the early 20th centuries. Many of the titles were produced by Singapore's earliest printing presses such as the Mission Press of the London Missionary Society.

Donations and gifts, including items that were not available for purchase, add diversity and depth to the National Library's collections. Over the years, the National Library is fortunate to have been the beneficiary of the personal collections of collectors, researchers and scholars, who systematically accumulated important reference materials over their years of study, or from individuals or institutions that

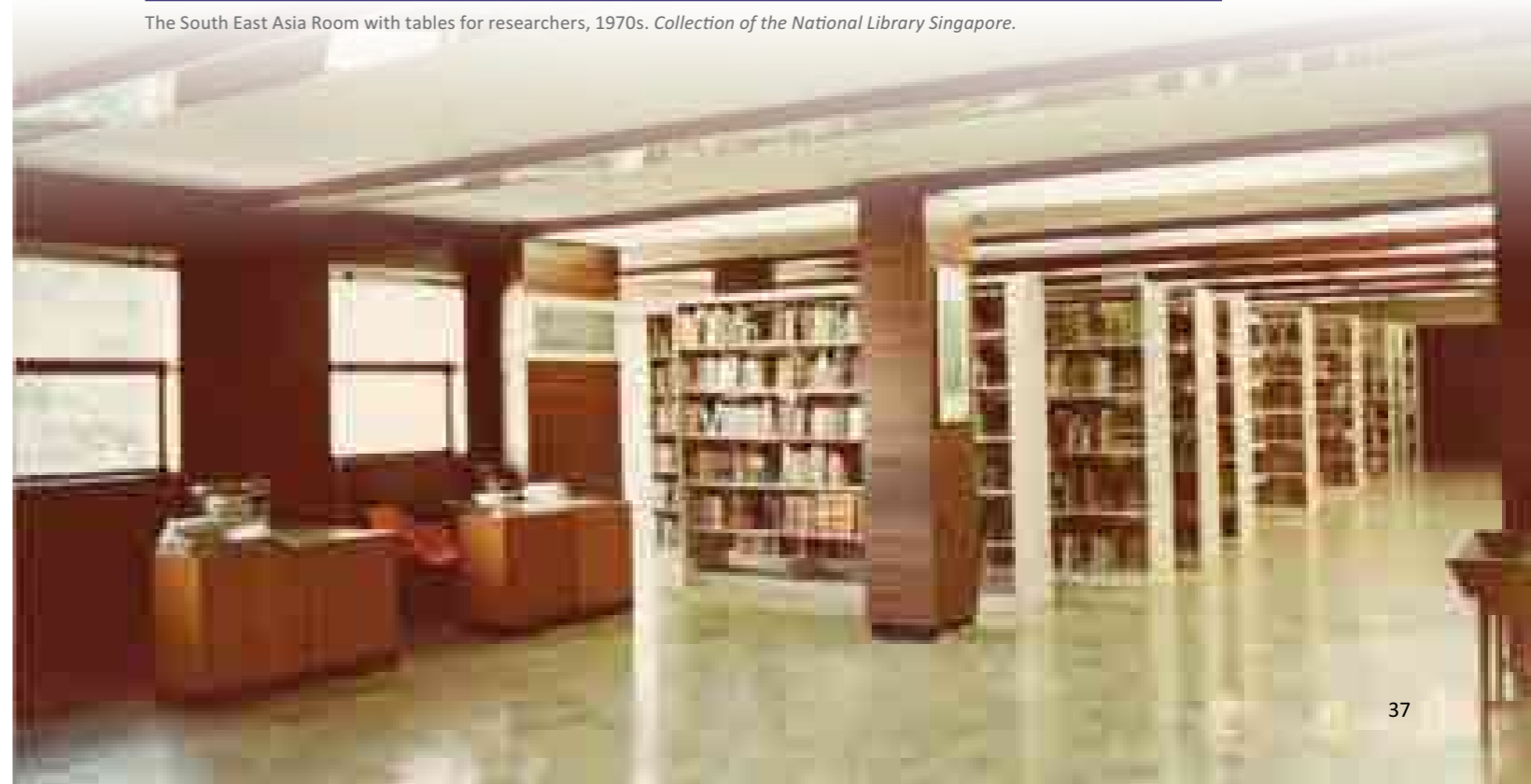


Carl Alexander Gibson-Hill speaking at an event, 1962. *Yusof Ishak Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

hold heritage materials of value such as manuscripts, private papers, letters and photographs. These items contribute to the preservation of Singapore's documentary heritage.

The National Library safeguards the published heritage of Singapore. Works published in Singapore are deposited with the National Library and these also make up part of the Singapore and Southeast Asia Collection. Known as legal deposit, it is the legislation by which a country ensures that copies of every publication produced and printed in the country are deposited with one or more designated repositories – usually a library.

The South East Asia Room with tables for researchers, 1970s. *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*





Published in 1849, *Hikayat Abdullah* (Stories of Abdullah) was written by the Malay teacher and scholar Abdullah Abdul Kadir (Munshi Abdullah). This copy even travelled overseas for an exhibition, *Treasures from the World's Great Libraries*, at the National Library of Australia from 2001 to 2002. Collection of the National Library Singapore (call no. RRARE 959.503 ABD).

Legal deposit is enshrined in the National Library Board Act (Chapter 197), which sets out the functions and powers of the National Library Board (NLB) to acquire, organise, preserve and make accessible Singapore's published legacy. Under the act, all library materials published and distributed in Singapore have to be deposited with the National Library. This includes two copies of every published material in a physical format and one copy in an electronic format. From 2018 onwards, the National Library also began archiving websites containing the .sg domain without needing to seek written permission from content owners.<sup>17</sup>

In 2014, NLB became a member of the Biodiversity Heritage Library consortium, the world's largest open-access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Along with other local institutions such as the Singapore Botanic Gardens and the National Parks Board, Singapore offers digital documentations with information on the flora and fauna in Southeast Asia from the 19th century to the present, depicting the rich biodiversity of the region.<sup>18</sup>

Since 2016, the National Library has embarked on the Singapore Digital Resource Project that aims to enrich the Singapore and Southeast Asia Collection and fill gaps. There have been several collaborations with overseas institutions to digitise, acquire digitised copies and make accessible the archival and printed materials of Singapore and Southeast Asia held by them. For instance, a five-year project with the British Library, which began in 2013, saw the digitisation of Malay manuscripts, early maps of Singapore and papers relating to Stamford Raffles,

thanks to a kind donation of £125,000 from William and Judith Bollinger.<sup>19</sup>

The strengths of the Singapore and Southeast Asia Collection are titles on the history (particularly Malayan colonial history), government, language and literature, and sociocultural descriptions of Singapore, Malaysia and the region. The materials are primarily in the four official languages – English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil. However, there are also items in European languages (for instance French and German), Japanese and some Southeast Asian languages (such as Indonesian, Thai and Tagalog).

Although print publications make up the core of the collection, there are also resources in formats such as microforms, maps, photographs, posters, ephemera, audiovisual and electronic databases. Together, they present a sense of the history, time and place of the people, societies and cultures of Singapore and the region, the changes in collection and research focus, as well as hot-button issues and how these have evolved over the years.

As the National Library continues to be a repository of the nation's documentary heritage and builds the collection through acquisition, donations, gifts and exchange with other libraries and digital acquisition, it also aims to be a leading resource centre on Southeast Asia.

### Users of the Singapore and Southeast Asia Collection

Many researchers and scholars have benefitted from the Singapore and Southeast Asia Collection through the years. The late Professor Ian Proudfoot (1946–2011) was an Australian researcher and former SEA Room user. He studied the Malay manuscripts collection held at the National Library during his early career and became one of the greatest philologist scholars on early Malay printing. He also found love in the SEA Room and got married to one of the librarians.

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The library regularly receives visits from former residents of Singapore or their descendants who are tracing the history of their forebears. They would scan newspaper articles or ask for street directories to check whether there have been changes to the street names or places where they used to live.

There have also been requests and visits by overseas institutions to use our resources for their research needs. For instance, in 2019, staff from the Xiamen Tan Kah Kee Memorial Museum requested to view all related resources available at the library on the businessman and philanthropist Tan Kah Kee in preparation for their anniversary celebrations.

The annual Lee Kong Chian Research Fellowship also sees batches of local and overseas researchers diving deep into the collection for their research topics. For instance, Anh Sy Huy Le, an Assistant Professor of History at St Norbert College, De Pere, Wisconsin, was awarded the Fellowship in January 2020. His research topic, "Trade, Colonialism and Diaspora: Chinese Rice Commerce and the Transformation of Sài Gòn–Chợ Lớn in Colonial Vietnam", examines the confluence of Chinese migration and diasporic capitalism in transforming Sài

Gòn–Chợ Lớn in the 1870s into a central trade emporium and prominent colonial port city.<sup>20</sup>

More recently, in 2022–23, Sharad Pandian, who graduated from the Nanyang Technological University with a degree in physics and holds a Master of Philosophy in History and Philosophy of Science at the University of Cambridge, discusses the standardisation and the promulgation of quality-consciousness by the Singapore Institute of Standards and Industrial Research (SISIR) in his topic, "Prosperity Through Quality and Reliability": SISIR and the Making of a Quality Conscious Nation".<sup>21</sup>

Library patrons have increasingly relied on digitised resources that the librarians put up online. The National Library Collections Directory ([www.nlb.gov.sg/main/nlcollectionsdirectory](http://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/nlcollectionsdirectory)) provides an overview of the library's rich Singapore content through a wide range of resources, including donor materials across different subjects and formats.

As research methods evolve over time with resources available beyond print, the strong link between collections, librarians and library users will remain constant. ♦



Librarians compile catalogues, bibliographies and resource guides featuring the rich Singapore and Southeast Asia Collection. The National Library also organises talks, exhibitions and programmes to promote the discovery and appreciation of the collection. Collection of the National Library Singapore.

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# PIONEERING ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Research into Malaya's prehistory took off in the 1930s under the leadership of the Raffles Library and Museum.

By Foo Shu Tieng



(Top, from left) Bone tool from Perlis; neolithic tool from Tanjong Bunga, Johor; neolithic kiln-stand from Tui Gold Mine, Pahang; hoabinhian biface tool from Gua Musang, Kelantan; stone bark-cloth beater from Ampang, Selangor. (Bottom, from left) Hoabinhian biface tool from Pahang; necked stone axe from Guak Kepah, Province Wellesley; round-axe from Baling, Kedah; round axe from Tanjong Bunga, Johor. Images reproduced from M.W.F. Tweedie, "The Stone Age in Malaya," *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 26, no. 2 (162) (October 1953): plate 10. (From JSTOR via NLB's eResources website).

The Raffles Library and Museum, the predecessor of today's National Library Singapore, played an important role in the archaeological research of the region. While there was some archaeological research about the Malay Peninsula in the 19th century, it was only from the mid-1930s, under the leadership of the museum, that the pace and intensity of these activities increased.<sup>1</sup>

With Eugène Dubois' discovery of the Java Man (*Homo erectus*) fossils in 1891–92 at Trinil on the island of Java, Asia was thought to be "the cradle of mankind".<sup>2</sup> Gold ornaments discovered at Fort Canning in 1928 also hinted at Singapore's potential

antiquity.<sup>3</sup> Grafton Elliot Smith – an Australian anatomy professor who famously x-rayed Egyptian mummies to learn about mummification methods and theorised about the way brains evolved – had also urged for more work in the study of ancient times in Malaya in 1931. He lamented that it was "particularly humiliating to us as Englishmen that so little is being done" in comparison to what the Dutch and French researchers were able to achieve in the region.<sup>4</sup>

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Researchers working under the centralising authority of the Raffles Library and Museum embarked on researching the prehistory of Malaya, first at Guar Kepah in Penang in 1934,<sup>5</sup> and then, following an injection of US\$20,000 from the Carnegie Corporation of New York (CCNY; an American philanthropic organisation), at other sites in the Malay Peninsula.<sup>6</sup>

Those funds were supplemented by a donation from the Empire Grants Committee of the Museums Association, based in the United Kingdom, that also partnered with the CCNY. The committee gave £1,000 to the Raffles Museum for the publication of manuscripts, for new museum furniture, and for the preparation of an index, introductory and life-history series.<sup>7</sup> Eight display cases were purchased for a new "Hall of Asiatic Prehistory", and exhibits were created with materials sent from many parts of Australasia.<sup>8</sup>

This would culminate with the Straits Settlements (comprising Melaka, Penang and Singapore) – represented by the Raffles Library and Museum – hosting its first congress on prehistory in Singapore in January 1938: the Third Congress of Prehistorians of the Far East. These meetings, which rotated its hosts, would later be formalised as the Far-Eastern Prehistory Association in 1953 and reorganised in 1976 as the Indo-Pacific Prehistory Association.<sup>9</sup>

From an attendance of just 30 delegates in 1938, the participation grew to some 800 archaeologists and cultural heritage professionals who attended the congress in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in November 2022.<sup>10</sup>

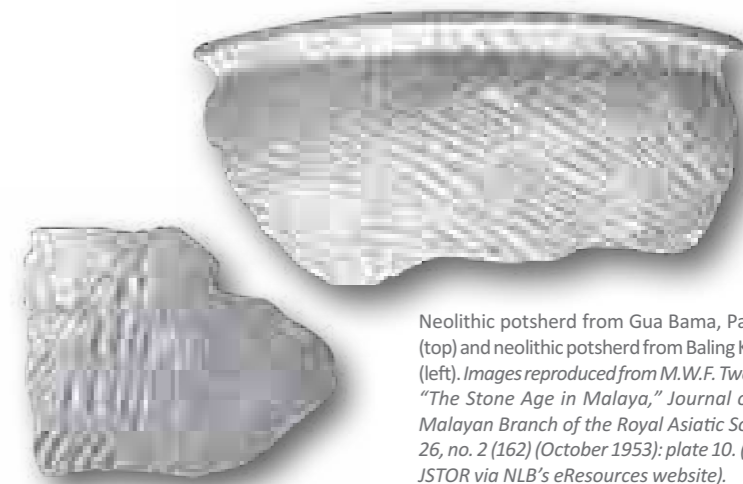
The 1938 congress in Singapore offered visitors and researchers the opportunity to look at displays of stone tools collectively from across the Asian region at the "Hall of Asiatic Prehistory" at the Raffles Museum, an important milestone that would allow for later regional cross-comparisons. The first of its kind in the Malay Peninsula, the congress generated so much public interest that some Malayan newspapers even reported which ship the delegates had arrived on.<sup>11</sup>

## Key Personalities

With its new-found funding and support, the Raffles Library and Museum began work. One of the first sites to be excavated was Guar Kepah in Penang. The dig, in 1934, was funded not only by a special grant by the Straits Settlements government but also with CCNY funds in its final stages.<sup>12</sup>

The excavation in Guar Kepah built on the survey reports of George Windsor Earl, the Resident Councillor of Penang, who first reported the site in 1860, and Ivor H.N. Evans, an ethnographer and pioneering archaeologist based at the Perak Museum in Taiping (a part of the Federated Malay States [FMS] Museums), who revisited the site in 1930.<sup>13</sup>

One of the places Evans visited in Penang was Guar Kepah. This site consisted of three shell middens (mounds where shell remains formed the majority of artefacts), near the south bank of the Muda River, and is now estimated to be in use between 5,000 and 6,000 years ago.



Neolithic potsherd from Gua Bama, Pahang (top) and neolithic potsherd from Baling, Kedah (left). Images reproduced from M.W.F. Tweedie, "The Stone Age in Malaya," *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 26, no. 2 (162) (October 1953): plate 10. (From JSTOR via NLB's eResources website).

Evans reported that the top section of the Guar Kepah mound he saw had been mined for its lime by lime burners (lime has several industrial applications such as in construction, or for agriculture), and that "the remains of it are only elevated about two or three feet above the surrounding land".<sup>14</sup>

Evans had trained under, and collaborated with, the renowned Dutch prehistorian and archaeologist Pieter Vincent van Stein Callenfels on cave excavations in 1926 and 1927 at Gua Badak and Gua Kerbau, both in Perak.<sup>15</sup> (Unfortunately, Evans was retrenched by the FMS government in 1932 as the Great Depression had left the government with a severe budget deficit.<sup>16</sup>)

In the 1934 Guar Kepah dig, Callenfels, who had excavated a similar shell midden site in Sumatra at Saentis near Medan, was the lead researcher responsible for the excavation report that would eventually be published in the first issue of the *Bulletin of the Raffles Museum* (Series B) in May 1936.<sup>17</sup> He also publicised the discoveries via the *Illustrated London News*, which was later reprinted by the *Malaya Tribune* in January 1935. Not only were stone tools discovered, but human remains were also found at the site. Callenfels wrote: "Certain facts point to so-called secondary burials, the body being exposed to a tree, or somewhere else in the jungle, till the flesh decayed, when the remaining bones were collected and interred. Another interesting fact is that all the skulls were profusely sprinkled with powdered red shale."<sup>18</sup>

As Callenfels was a recognised expert in the prehistory of Southeast Asia and had worked in many parts of Asia, he had an extensive network and was a key figure in applying for the CCNY funds for the Guar Kepah project.<sup>19</sup>

Michael Willmer Forbes Tweedie (M.W.F. Tweedie) and Herbert Dennis Collings (H.D. Collings), curator and assistant curator respectively at the Raffles Library and Museum, had supervised the Guar Kepah excavations. They were influenced by Callenfels' use of systematic survey equipment such as a theodolite (which can measure width [distance] and depth) and compass in recording finds, although the method of stratigraphic recording (documenting soil layers in order to understand a sequence of events based on geological principles) and analysis would not be used until much later, in the mid-1950s.<sup>20</sup>

Victor Purcell, who joined the Malayan Civil Service in 1921 and who authored several books, noted the care in which Callenfels conducted the excavations: “[D]igging was not the word to describe the very delicate process whereby [Callenfels] disinterred the secrets of millennia dead and gone. He used a theodolite to measure levels and the excavation was done mainly with special wooden scrapers, and when the object to be disinterred was very precious, the final removal of earth was done with a brush or even a feather.”<sup>21</sup>

Cecil Boden Kloss, director of the Raffles Library and Museums during Evans’ exploration of the Guar Kepah site, also played an important role in the history of archaeological research in Malaya. He was supposedly the one who decided to purchase the Guar Kepah site for future excavations, although this is difficult to verify.<sup>22</sup> Kloss was officially appointed Director of Museums, FMS and Straits Settlements, in September 1926 after the retirement of previous FMS Museum director, Herbert Christopher Robinson. Kloss retired in 1931 and was succeeded by Frederick Nutter Chasen (F.N. Chasen), who visited the Guar Kepah site in 1933.<sup>23</sup>

Chasen and Collings attended the Second Congress of Prehistorians of the Far East in Manila in 1935, where Collings presented the preliminary finds from Guar Kepah.<sup>24</sup> It was also during this meeting that the Raffles Library and Museum became a repository for centralising “typological and comparative collections of pre-historic objects from the whole of the further East” for regional comparisons by type of artefacts.<sup>25</sup>

However, questions still remain about how (and, more importantly, why) these archaeological projects really began at the Raffles Library and Museum. The timing of these projects seems curious, particularly since these projects began in the middle of the Great Depression (1929–39).

The timing also raises the question of why an American philanthropic organisation was financing projects in British colonial territories during this period. From the available published

research, it appears that Frederick Paul Keppel, the third Secretary of War for the United States during World War I (1914–18) and president of the CCNY in 1923, was instrumental in shifting the CCNY’s philanthropic interests outside of the US.<sup>26</sup>

According to Richard Glotzer, a professor of social work at the University of Akron, Keppel had “unique insight into the complex relationship between the growing international stature of the United States and the pre-eminence of Great Britain as a world power” and he “understood the Anglo American relationship was cultural, economic and strategic.”<sup>27</sup>

Sydney F. Markham, the secretary for the British Museums Association, who visited the Raffles Library and Museum in March 1934 as part of a great survey of the museums of the British Empire, was also another key figure. This is because the association had the ability to recommend the allocation of CCNY funds. Markham was impressed by the work of the Raffles Museum. “[T]he work of Mr M.W.F. Tweedie [curator at the Raffles Museum], his colleagues and predecessors, has been of such a high order that the result is wonderfully encouraging,” he said.<sup>28</sup>

A study of the CCNY’s allocation of Commonwealth funds published in 1963 showed that while

CCNY funds were disbursed to many parts of the former British Empire for museum development, as part of a larger museum movement, Malaya was the only recipient of funding for prehistoric research.<sup>29</sup>

## The Future of Archaeological Research

Thanks to a confluence of factors, archaeological research began at the Raffles Library and Museum in the 1930s.

Are there possibilities for further research? This is feasible since the private papers of H.D. Collings are now at the Suffolk Archives as he returned to the United Kingdom in his later years.<sup>30</sup> However, some of the key personnel involved in the early archaeological projects died early.

According to Tweedie’s final report to the CCNY dated 28 August 1946, Chasen lost his life in 1942 while attempting to flee Singapore on the eve of the Japanese invasion. Herbert Deane Noone (better known as H.D. Noone or Pat Noone), who was based at the Perak Museum in Taiping and responsible for the expenditure of CCNY funds in later years (such as the excavations in Kelantan in 1941), joined the guerrilla fighters during World War II and disappeared in 1943.<sup>31</sup>



Noone’s manuscript and personal papers were either lost in the looting of the Perak Museum in December 1941, or kept with Noone when he went into the jungle and disappeared.<sup>32</sup> As for the Guar Kepah site, it has transformed into a cultural resource today, with many more researchers investigating the site and its artefacts in later periods. The Guar Kepah Archaeological Gallery is slated to open to display various finds.<sup>33</sup> ♦

Dutch prehistorian and archaeologist Pieter Vincent van Stein Callenfels at an excavation in the Dutch East Indies, 1920–21. Courtesy of Leiden University Libraries.

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A side profile photo of a shell midden at Guar Kepah. Image reproduced from P.V. van Stein Callenfels, “An Excavation of Three Kitchen Middens at Guak Kepah, Province Wellesley, Straits Settlements,” *Bulletin of the Raffles Museum Singapore, Straits Settlements, Series B*, no. 1 (May 1936), Plate XXX, Figure 2. (From National Library Online).



# LEGAL DEPOSIT LEGISLATION in Singapore

The legal deposit function in Singapore can be traced back to an 1835 law enacted in India to control and regulate the flow of information.

By **Makeswary Periasamy**

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A library staff records local newspapers received under the Printers and Publishers Ordinance at the National Library on Stamford Road, 1962. Collection of the National Library Singapore.

National libraries worldwide serve as custodians of their nations' published heritage, collecting and preserving materials for future generations. These collections represent the cultural and literary memory of the respective countries. In early post-independent Singapore, the library was hailed as a symbol of nationhood,<sup>1</sup> with legal deposit becoming a crucial tool for building and maintaining its collections.

Originating in France in 1537,<sup>2</sup> legal deposit is a legislation enacted by a country to ensure copies of every local publication are deposited with one or more designated institutions. Similar legislation enacted in Great Britain in the mid-17th century was extended to its colonies and territories in the early 19th century.<sup>3</sup> While initially conceived to control the printing press and to censor heretical ideas, legal deposit legislation evolved into a tool for registering copyright and intellectual property ownership, ultimately becoming an expedient method for collecting and preserving local literary heritage.

## Early Legislations

Singapore's legal deposit system traces its origins to the Book Registration Ordinance No. XV of 1886 in the Straits Settlements (comprising Melaka, Penang and Singapore). This ordinance stemmed from two earlier legislations from colonial India, enacted in 1835 and 1867, designed to regulate the press and control information flow. It also emerged from 19th-century legislative changes in the United Kingdom (UK) and lobbying efforts by the British Museum and other UK institutions seeking deposits of works published throughout the British Empire, including the Straits Settlements.

The Indian Act No. XI of 1835 first mandated that printers and publishers must declare their "periodical work" before a magistrate and file the records with the court. This act introduced fundamental principles, including the mandatory printing of names and places of printing/publication clearly on all works, with penalties for non-compliance.<sup>4</sup>

The UK's International Copyright Act of 1838 introduced requirements for registering all new publications at Stationers' Hall in London, with a copy to be deposited in the British Museum Library. The act was also extended to the British Dominions and required detailed registers to be maintained. Both registration and the certificate of proof incurred charges.<sup>5</sup>

Subsequent amendments in 1839 and 1842 mandated delivery of new works to the British Museum within one month of publication or offer for sale, with the 1842 act encompassing colonial publications too. When the museum encountered difficulties obtaining works from both domestic and overseas publishers, an 1878 government report recommended combining both the registration and deposit functions within the museum while colonial publications were purchased.<sup>6</sup>

The Indian Act No. XXV of 1867 superseded the 1835 act and took charge of press regulation. It also expanded on the regulations requiring three copies of every book printed or lithographed in British India to be preserved and registered.<sup>7</sup> Though not directly applicable to the Straits Settlements, this act established the foundation for Singapore's legal deposit regulations.

The 1867 Indian Act maintained the printing press restrictions of 1835, requiring all publications to clearly display the printer's name, publisher's details and place of publication. The act broadly defined "book" to include printed books, serials, pamphlets, sheet music and maps. Publishers had to submit three "best copies" of each publication, including any subsequent editions, to a designated local government official (as notified in the gazette) within one month. Notably, the 1867 act required officials to pay for deposit copies intended for public sale and, more importantly, maintain a catalogue specifically titled *Catalogue of Books Printed in British India*, which shall contain a "memorandum of every book" deposited. Following the 1838 Copyright Act, registering a deposit copy in the catalogue incurred a nominal fee.<sup>8</sup>

These catalogues enabled the British Museum and other institutions to track and buy publications from British colonies when traditional deposit methods proved unsuccessful.<sup>9</sup>

The British Museum's collecting efforts faced challenges with the UK's International Copyright Act of 1886 which exempted British possessions from deposit requirements in the UK. Fortunately, the Colonial Office in London directed all colonial governors to implement a book registration system mirroring the successful model established in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) the previous year, including sending copies directly to the British Museum.<sup>10</sup> Most colonies agreed and enacted corresponding laws.

## Book Registration Ordinance of 1886

The Book Registration Ordinance, implemented on 1 January 1887, required three copies of every Straits Settlements publication to be deposited with Singapore's Colonial Secretary's Office. One deposited copy and two copies of the memoranda of books were subsequently sent to the British Museum Library.<sup>11</sup>

Similar to the 1867 Indian Act, the 1886 ordinance broadly defined "book" to include "every volume, or part of division of a volume, and pamphlet, in any language, and every sheet of music, map, chart or plan separately printed or lithographed".<sup>12</sup> Publication details were recorded in an official catalogue, published quarterly in the government gazette. If printers did not comply, they could be fined up to \$25.

Though not officially designated as the local depository, the Raffles Library (National Library's predecessor) received one of the deposited copies.<sup>13</sup> This arrangement and the challenge in managing the collection was documented by Librarian G.D. Haviland in 1893. He wrote: "Since 1886, publications have been forwarded to the Library under the Book Registration Ordinance; these have never been arranged at all; this

year a small room has been kept especially for them, but they have not yet been sorted sufficiently to make them available for reference."<sup>14</sup>

The Raffles Library and Museum operated as a unified institution initially situated within the Raffles Institution building. The relocation to its new premises in 1887 (now the National Museum of Singapore) was prolonged, primarily due to the substantial expansion of its collection following the implementation of the 1886 ordinance.<sup>15</sup>

## The Printers and Publishers Ordinance

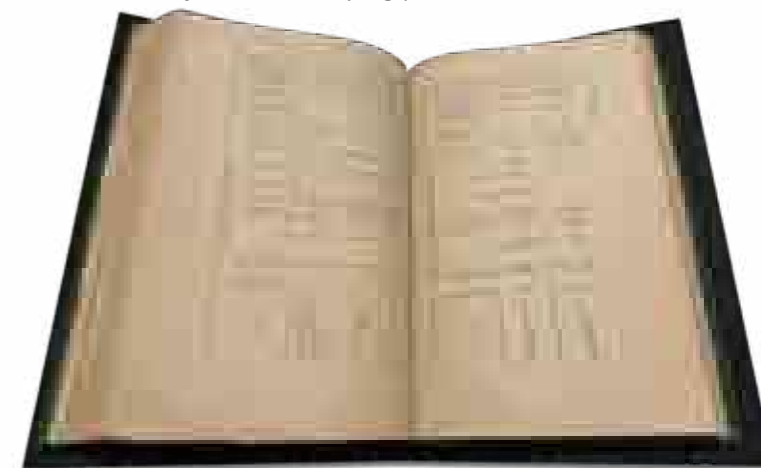
In 1920, the Legislative Council of Singapore passed new legislation that expanded the law governing newspapers, books, documents and printing presses.<sup>16</sup> Known as Ordinance No. 2 (Printers and Publishers), it consolidated both the Indian Act No. XI of 1835 and the Book Registration Ordinance No. XV of 1886.

The Colonial Secretary's Office maintained its role in receiving and registering new Singapore publications and recorded them for the quarterly gazette notification. Since January 1931, Chinese books published in Singapore were delivered to the Chinese Protectorate,<sup>17</sup> who redirected them to the Colonial Secretary.<sup>18</sup> The legislation underwent several amendments before its 1936 revision as the Printers and Publishers Ordinance (Chapter 209).<sup>19</sup>

The Japanese Occupation (1942–45) temporarily disrupted the deposit system. Colonial staff members, Edred J. H. Corner and William Birtwistle, documented rescue operations to safeguard existing collections within civil service departments, including the Colonial Secretary's Office. Normal operations resumed after the war.<sup>20</sup>

A significant change occurred in 1948 when the Raffles Library and Museum assumed responsibility for administering the Printers and Publishers Ordinance, becoming the official depository institution. This function came under the charge of the Archivist, a position created in 1938.<sup>21</sup>

First issue of the "Memoranda of Books Registered in the Catalogue of Books Printed in the Straits Settlements" printed in the 20 May 1887 issue of the *Straits Settlements Government Gazette*. Collection of the National Library Singapore.





Tan Soo Chye, the first archivist appointed by the Straits Settlements government in 1938 to manage the historical records at the archives office at the Raffles Library and Museum. Source: *The Straits Times*, 13 August 1939 © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

Tan Soo Chye, appointed as the first Archivist, began reporting the annual statistics of newly registered books under the ordinance from 1950 onwards. His 1951 report for the Raffles Library and Museum noted that these figures excluded newspapers and periodicals, while Chinese books remained under the purview of the Chinese Secretariat (formerly Chinese Protectorate). He also noted the continued practice of sending deposit copies to the British Museum Library.<sup>22</sup>

A significant reorganisation occurred in 1955 when the management of government archives, microfilming of records and the legal deposit function were transferred from the Archivist to the Librarian. This shift added to the existing “book and information services” of the Raffles Library.<sup>23</sup> The transfer was partly necessitated by Tan’s departure to the Department of Customs and Excise in December 1953, leaving the Archivist position vacant until 1967.<sup>24</sup>

The 1955 amendments to the ordinance, now known as the Printers and Publishers Ordinance (Chapter 196), formally authorised the Raffles Library to collect and preserve local publications via deposit.<sup>25</sup> That same year marked the separation of library and museum functions, with the appointment of a dedicated director for the Raffles Library.<sup>26</sup> The fine for non-compliance also increased from \$25 to \$50.

The Raffles National Library Ordinance of 1957 ushered in a milestone in the history of the National Library. In 1958, Raffles Library was renamed Raffles National Library and became a free public library. This legislation established the library as “the only authority in the Colony providing a library service for the general public” with government financial support. More importantly, the ordinance empowered the library and its director to collect and preserve all publications printed in Singapore through deposit.

Prior to 1955, the director of the Raffles Museum held responsibility for library and archives functions, including the mandate to receive publications on deposit. The 1957 ordinance transferred these depository functions and the archives legally to the Raffles National Library. Subsequently, under

the Raffles National Library (Change of Name) Ordinance in 1960, the institution was renamed the National Library.<sup>27</sup>

In 1967, the National Archives and Records Centre Act was enacted, leading to the separation of library and archives functions. The National Archives and Records Centre was established in 1968 while an amendment to the National Library Act in 1968 reinforced the library’s functions and services, including its authority “to collect and receive all books required to be deposited in the National Library under the provisions of the Printers and Publishers Ordinance and to preserve such books”.<sup>28</sup>

The Printers and Publishers Ordinance underwent several amendments in the 1950s and 1960s. The 1960 amendment mandated that the publisher (previously it was the printer) must deposit six copies (instead of the earlier three copies) of a work published and printed in Singapore to the National Library. The penalty for non-delivery of books by the publisher increased from \$50 to \$500, which became \$1,000 and \$5,000 in 1968 and 1996 respectively. Subsequently, the number of deposit copies was reduced to five under the Printers and Publishers (Amendment) Act of 1967.<sup>29</sup> Revisions were made to the act in 1970 and again in 1985.

Out of the five copies deposited with the National Library, two copies would be preserved in the library while “the remaining copies shall be disposed of as the Director of the National Library thinks fit”.<sup>30</sup>

One of the copies retained by the library was preserved in the Publishers and Printers Act collection (later called the Legal Deposit collection and now PublicationSG), while the other was catalogued and kept in the reference section of the National Library. These reference copies are now part of the Singapore and Southeast Asia Collection at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library. The remaining three copies were given to academic libraries and the Ministry of Culture, or sent to the public libraries as loan copies.

## Catalogues and Bibliographies

Like the 1867 Indian Act, the 1886 Book Registration Ordinance required the officer registering the deposit copy to maintain a catalogue of books containing all the essential details, known as memorandum, that would be published in the government gazette every quarter. The Colonial Secretary’s Office served as the local depository and an officer there was assigned to register the deposited copies and compile the catalogue.

In Singapore, the very first catalogue of books was published in the 20 May 1887 issue of the gazette for the quarter ending 31 March 1887 with the title *Memoranda of Books Registered in the Catalogue of Books Printed in the Straits Settlements Under the Provisions of Ordinance No. XV of 1886*.<sup>31</sup> The catalogue listed five publications printed in Singapore: a school textbook in Tamil, the weekly and daily issues of the *Straits Times*, the magazine of St Andrew’s Cathedral and the *Singapore & Straits Directory* of 1887. The memoranda of books continued to be published

in the gazette until April 1995 when the National Library Board Act came into effect.

Since 1969, the National Library has been compiling the annual *Singapore National Bibliography* (SNB) which contains local titles deposited with the library under the Printers and Publishers Ordinance. The compilation of current and historical bibliographies was laid out as a statutory function of a national library within the 1957 Raffles National Library Ordinance.

The first issue of the SNB, featuring publications printed in 1967, was released in August 1969 and sold to the public at \$3.<sup>32</sup> Over the years, the SNB was expanded to include titles received through donations and purchases as well as electronic publications. It was produced in CD-ROM format from 1993, as a DVD from 2009 and as an online bibliography from 2011. The SNB was decommissioned after the launch of PublicationSG in October 2015, an online catalogue that made publicly available the more than one million legal deposit titles.

## New Legislations

In 1995, both the 1985 revised National Library Act and Printers and Publishers Act were subsumed under the National Library Board Act (No. 5 of 1995), establishing the National Library Board (NLB) as the custodian of Singapore’s published heritage. All works that are published or produced in Singapore are required to be deposited with the National Library Singapore within four weeks from the date of publication under Section 10 of the NLB Act.

The number of copies to be deposited by the publisher was reduced to two, and both copies were retained by the National Library. The NLB Act also mandated that only works published and distributed, not printed, in Singapore need to be deposited. Over the years, with the increasing popularity of electronic and online publishing, the act was updated in 2018 to include digital content.<sup>33</sup>

Over the last 190 years, legal deposit in Singapore has evolved from legislation enacted in India in 1835 – to control and censor printing – into an important tool by which the National Library has been able to comprehensively collect and preserve all works published in Singapore for present and future generations. Both the memoranda of books and the SNB provide a record of Singapore’s publishing activities since the late 19th century and are important sources of information documenting Singapore’s published heritage. ♦

First issue of the *Singapore National Bibliography* compiled by the National Library in 1967 and published in 1969. *Collection of the National Library Singapore*.



## NOTES

- 1 K.K. Seet, *A Place for the People* (Singapore: Times Books International, 1983), 112. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 027.55957 SEE-[LIB])
- 2 The first legal deposit system was established in France by King Francis I who signed the Ordonnance de Montpellier on 28 December 1537, requiring printers and booksellers to deposit a copy of every printed book with the Royal Library.
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- 8 *Acts of the Government of India, from 1834 to 1838 Inclusive*, 126–31.
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- 27 Raffles Museum and Library, *Annual Report 1957*, 1; Seet, *A Place for the People*, 106.
- 28 Gloria Chandry, “Herein Lie ‘Secrets’ of Our Heritage,” *Straits Times*, 1 December 1978, 21. (From NewspaperSG); Byrd, *Books in Singapore*, 103–104.
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# A RECENT HISTORY OF LEGAL DEPOSIT IN SINGAPORE

The scope of legal deposit in Singapore expanded to digital materials and web archiving in 2018.

By Samantha Chen

For decades, legal deposit in the National Library laboured quietly in the background, collecting and preserving Singapore's published heritage. In October 2015, PublicationSG (<https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/publicationsg/>) thrust legal deposit into the spotlight.

To mark the 50th anniversary of Singapore's independence and the 20th birthday of the National Library Board (NLB), the National Library launched PublicationSG, an online catalogue that made the more than one million legal deposit titles stored away for preservation available to the public for the first time.

Making the Legal Deposit Collection digitally searchable meant that a database about the items first had to be created and systemised – a monumental undertaking. For many months before the launch, staff were rostered to accession (assign barcodes) and catalogue the publications.

The result of the rigorous mobilisation led to the creation of more than 800,000 records for items in the Legal Deposit Collection, almost eight times more than the volume in a normal year. Concurrently, staff from the IT department worked on creating the PublicationSG microsite, while librarians crafted the policies and processes for accessing the materials.

The launch of PublicationSG was accompanied by *Our Published Heritage*, an exhibition held at the National Library Building from October 2015 to February 2016.

Highlights included the July 1960 inaugural issue of *Her World* magazine, the first issue of the Singapore



The display of legal deposit titles at the launch of PublicationSG, 2015. *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*

Armed Forces' *Pioneer* magazine in 1969, and the programme booklet commemorating the foundation stone-laying ceremony of Clyde Terrace Market on 29 March 1873.<sup>1</sup>

## Digital Legal Deposit

PublicationSG also marked the first step in the digitalisation of the Legal Deposit Collection. With the multitude of digital platforms (websites, social media, etc.) and formats (videos, e-publications, etc.)

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and their widespread adoption into daily life, NLB recognised that it had to start collecting digital and web-based materials.

Even as PublicationSG was being launched, preparations were already underway to amend the NLB Act to include digital materials within its mandatory collecting scope.

In July 2018, the passing of the National Library Board (Amendment) Act marked a second milestone for digital legal deposit, allowing the National Library to archive websites containing the .sg domain without the need for written permission from content owners.<sup>2</sup>

To prepare for the expanded role, the Web Archive Singapore portal (WAS, <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/webarchives/landing-page>) – an initiative that began in 2006 to archive Singapore-related websites – was revamped in August 2018 and incorporated into the Legal Deposit Collection.

In anticipation of the statutory change, NLB brought back *Our Published Heritage* in November 2018 – this time as a two-day roadshow – to help the public understand what legal deposit (physical and digital) is and why it is meaningful for Singapore.

This was followed by the launch of the Deposit Portal (<https://www.nlb.gov.sg/depositapp/>) in 2021, a one-stop online portal for publishers to deposit their Singapore e-publications and apply for International Standard Numbers (a standardised international number that uniquely identifies a publication).

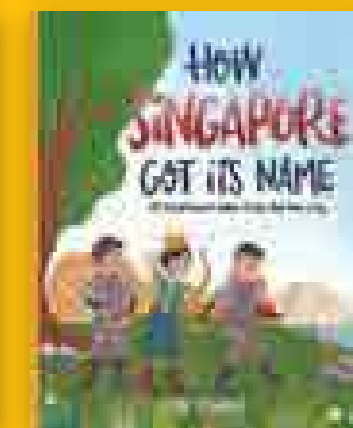
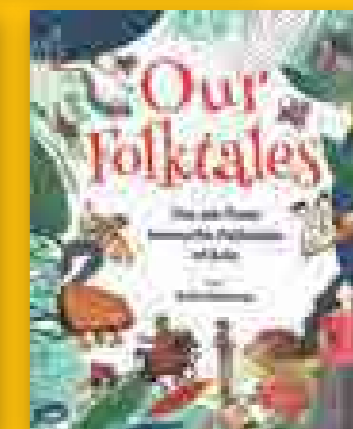
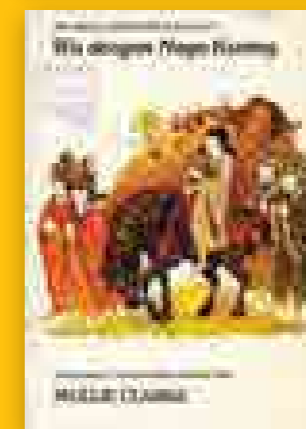
## Public Awareness

*Our Published Heritage* gave focus to the breadth of Singapore's published heritage and underscored the importance of preserving it. However, legal deposit's "national character" – a term that Director of the National Library Hedwig Anuar had used to describe the Legal Deposit Collection in 1962<sup>3</sup> – is sometimes interpreted differently by publishers and the public.

In 1976, a local author was peeved when the National Library notified him to deposit five copies of his booklet at his own expense with the library, instead of purchasing lending copies to reward him for his contributions. He had the misconception that only local writers and not others had to deposit their works.<sup>4</sup> The National Library had to clarify that the function of legal deposit was to preserve Singapore's published heritage, and that the legislation applied to all writers. The library also assured him that copies of his book had been purchased for loan purposes.<sup>5</sup>

## Collection Highlights

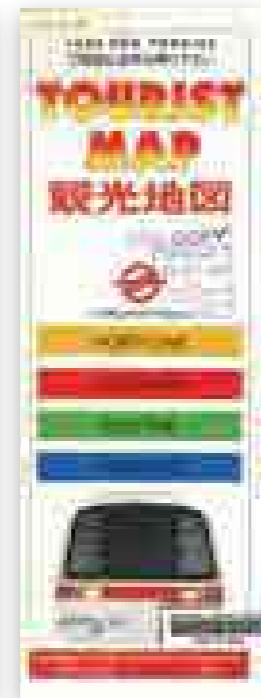
Because of its broad collecting scope, some materials may exist exclusively in legal deposit. In 2020, history enthusiast Lee Xuan Jin blogged about how he managed to hunt down two works by the local writer Cao Mo (曹沫) in PublicationSG after a fruitless search elsewhere.<sup>6</sup>



A selection of children's folktales shows how these have evolved over time to focus more on Singapore tales. *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*



(From left)  
This 1980 poster by the Singapore Family Planning and Population Board encouraged Singaporeans to have only two children. *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*



*Tourist Map* (1990) published by the Singapore Mass Rapid Transit shows a map of Singapore with the four MRT lines. It also highlights places of interest. *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*

A meme from SGAG during the Covid-19 pandemic, April–June 2020. *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*

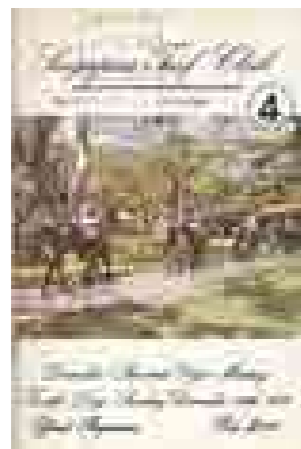


Legal deposit can also include materials with limited public circulation, or which are not commercially available. It can also encompass ephemeral formats such as campaign posters or programme booklets that are usually discarded, making them valuable primary sources.

Likewise, web-based materials are “snapshots” that preserve otherwise fleeting components of Singapore’s internet heritage. In view of the rapidly evolving digital landscape, NLB must be selective about the web-based materials it collects. For websites, the focus is on those with the .sg domain.

NLB may also do more targeted collecting under special circumstances. The one-time collection of Covid-19 memes from SGAG is an example.<sup>7</sup> Memes are a form of image-based digital communication that rely on recontextualising popular images circulated online. The SGAG memes play on Singaporean tropes to grapple with the reality of the pandemic, effectively capturing the zeitgeist of a Singapore during the 2020 circuit breaker.

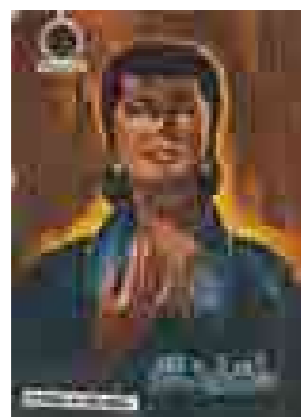
Last but not least, legal deposit documents the rich history of publishing itself, and testifies to a writing, publishing and retail industry that has shaped Singapore’s literary environment today.



(Clockwise from top left)  
This 1979 booklet from the Singapore Turf Club recalls the heyday of the club and horse racing in Singapore. *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*



This 1964 edition is a reprint of the tale of Hang Tuah retold and popularised by prominent British officer, Abdul Mubin Sheppard. It was published by Donald Moore, himself a notable contributor to Singapore's arts and publishing scene. *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*



好公民 (一上–六下) (1A–6B) (1996), or *Good Citizen*, is a series of moral education textbooks launched in 1981 to instil values and equip students with skills to be good individuals and useful citizens. *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*

*Mata Intan* (1951), a love story, was written in Jawi by the popular Malay novelist Wijaya Mala. In the early years, it was not uncommon for books to be published in Jawi, Arabic or Javanese. *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*

## Challenges and New Formats

When it comes to physical legal deposit items, NLB faces a perennial problem: the larger the collection, the greater the issue of space shortage.<sup>8</sup> On the digital front, NLB has to constantly update its digital infrastructure to keep up with new storage and format requirements.

More recently, developments in artificial intelligence (AI) technology mean that novel digital formats, such as algorithms, could potentially fall within the scope of legal deposit. Besides the challenges of collecting and preserving such materials, issues of transparency, copyright protection, fair use and more could also arise when attempting to make such proprietary materials publicly accessible.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, other libraries have started to encounter AI-generated works in their legal deposit collections. This has raised questions of authenticity and whether such works can, or should, be included in the corpus of a nation’s published heritage – something Singapore could also expect to encounter in the foreseeable future.

For now, NLB continues to grow its Legal Deposit Collection and has even embarked on social media archiving. An Instagram account that NLB has archived belongs to Lynn Wong Yuqing (@lynnwyyq), a heritage consultant on a “mission to uncover, document, and revive disappearing foods, festivals, spaces, and communities in Singapore”.<sup>10</sup> Sri Warisan Som Said Performing Arts Ltd, a multidisciplinary performing arts company, has likewise contributed their Facebook archives to NLB for preservation.<sup>11</sup>

Members of the public can get involved by recommending Instagram, Facebook and YouTube accounts for archiving via “Internet Gems”, the annual callout on social media for public nominations. NLB intends to make the archived social media accounts accessible in future when the technology to do so has been developed.

While legal deposit in Singapore started out as a regulation for publishers, the latest initiatives by the



Screenshot of Lynn Wong’s Instagram page (@lynnwyyq). *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*

National Library show that the legal deposit statutory function has evolved to keep up with the times, one that has and continues to grow through interacting with legislation, publishers and the public. ♦

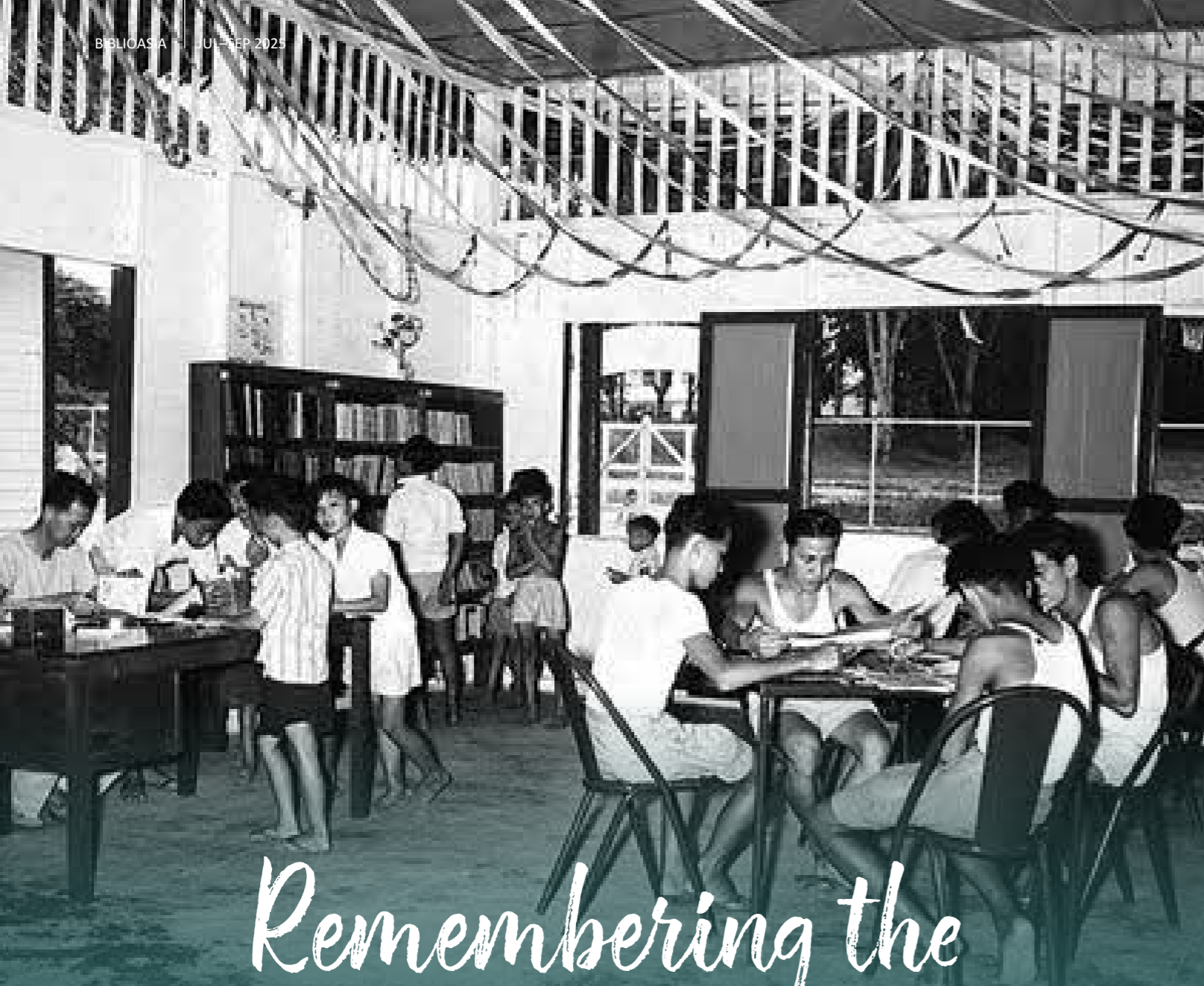
### NOTES

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### ACCESSING THE LEGAL DEPOSIT COLLECTION

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The Legal Deposit electronic collection is available for viewing at a designated computer terminal at Level 11 of the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library at the National Library Building, Victoria Street.



# Remembering the PART-TIME LIBRARIES

Part-time branch libraries served residents living in suburban Singapore before fulltime public libraries were built.

By Goh Lee Kim

The reading room of the Yio Chu Kang Part-time Branch Library, 1950s. It was run by volunteers and popular among students from the school opposite. *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*

When Irene Chee was in primary school in the 1950s, one of her favourite things to do after school was to drop by a library to borrow books. However, the library she went to was not the Raffles Library on Stamford Road (which became the National Library in 1960). Instead, she patronised a tiny library in her neighbourhood in Katong, the Joo Chiat Library, which was located in the Joo Chiat Community Centre.

She remembers that the library was very small. “I studied in Katong Convent and on some days, I would drop by the library on my way home from school. I remember borrowing books by Enid Blyton and this started my interest in reading,” recalled Chee, who is now 79.<sup>1</sup>

Not many people today know this, but there used to be part-time branch libraries in Singapore. The library in Joo Chiat was one of eight part-time libraries run by the Raffles Library between the 1950s and the early 1980s. These libraries were found in the suburbs of Singapore – Upper Serangoon, Siglap, Joo Chiat, Yio Chu Kang, Chai Chee, Bedok, Jurong and Whampoa.

These part-time libraries were usually small and did not have a large collection of books. They typically borrowed spaces in buildings like community centres and social welfare centres, although one was located in a void deck. They only opened three or four times a week and had shorter hours.

The first fulltime branch library established by the National Library was the Queenstown Branch Library, which opened in 1970 and located on Margaret Drive. Before fulltime branch libraries were opened, people could only rely on part-time libraries (and mobile libraries) if they could not afford the time or money to travel to Stamford Road.

These part-time libraries thus played an important role in bringing books to outlying communities before a network of fulltime branch libraries was set up. Subsequently, these part-time libraries continued to exist as a stop-gap measure for new estates that did not yet have a fulltime branch library nearby. However, as the National Library’s network of libraries effectively fanned out throughout Singapore, the need for part-time libraries declined. The last part-time branch library in Whampoa opened in 1981 and was shuttered six years later.

## Expanding Library Services

For decades, the subscription-based Raffles Library – established in 1845 as the Singapore Library – was the main library catering to the public.<sup>2</sup> Since 1887, the Raffles Library had shared the same building with the Raffles Museum on Stamford Road. By the 1920s, as the collections and exhibits expanded, the lack of space became an issue and there were calls for the government to consider expanding or relocating the library to larger premises to accommodate the growing visitorship and collections.<sup>3</sup>

In May 1940, the Straits Settlements Association submitted a letter to the government to recommend

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Library	Location	Date of Opening	Date of Closure
Upper Serangoon	Social Welfare Centre, Lim Ah Pin Road	29 December 1953	June 1960
Siglap	Social Welfare Centre, junction of East Coast Road and Palm Road	1 July 1954	20 March 1981
Joo Chiat*	Joo Chiat Community Centre, Joo Chiat Road	1 October 1955	1 June 1974
Yio Chu Kang	Yio Chu Kang Community Centre, Yio Chu Kang Road	24 November 1956	June 1960
Chai Chee**	A shophouse in Block 28, Chai Chee Avenue	9 November 1974	January 1981
Jurong	Jurong Town Community Centre, Yung An Road	15 November 1977	23 May 1988
Bedok	Block 209 Upper Changi Road, Bedok Town Centre	14 January 1981	15 August 1985
Whampoa	Block 73, Whampoa Road, opposite Whampoa Community Centre	1 October 1981	30 July 1987

\* Joo Chiat Library was opened on 9 August 1949 by the Social Welfare Department and the British Council. It came under the management of the Raffles Library in 1955.

\*\* Chai Chee Part-time Branch Library relocated to Bedok Town Centre in 1981 and became Bedok Part-time Branch Library.

improvements to library services in Singapore. One recommendation was the establishment of branch libraries and reading rooms in the suburbs – such as Katong, Siglap, Paya Lebar and Pasir Panjang – where the majority of the population lived. The association pointed out that the Raffles Library “fails by reason of its high cost and its situation and hours, to appeal to considerable sections of the English-speaking and English-reading public which have small means and little spare time”.<sup>4</sup>

Around the same time, the Raffles Library’s committee of management was also considering extension plans of its own. It was keen to take over parts of the former St Andrew’s School on Stamford Road next door to set up a public library.<sup>5</sup>

F.N. Chasen, the director of the Raffles Library and Museum, believed that such extensions were critical: “As I see it, the ideal library situation in this city is that every responsible person should have access to a well-stocked reference and lending library... For books are not luxuries; far from it: they are among the prime necessities of life.”<sup>6</sup> However, as the library was subsidised by the government, it lacked the necessary funding for this extension. In July 1940, the government postponed the extension scheme citing cost concerns and other uses for the school building.<sup>7</sup>

During the Japanese Occupation (1942–45), the Raffles Library and Museum was appropriated by the Japanese and renamed Syonan Tosyokan and Syonan Hakubutsukan respectively. When the war ended, it reopened to the public on 1 December 1945.<sup>8</sup> Users promptly returned and within a year, membership at the Raffles Library reached its highest ever recorded.<sup>9</sup>



(Above) Lady Gimson, wife of Governor Franklin Gimson, speaking at the opening ceremony of Joo Chiat Library on 9 August 1949. Source: *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.



(Top right) The reading area of the Joo Chiat Part-time Branch Library, 1950s. Collection of the National Library Singapore.

(Below) Joo Chiat Community Centre, 1964. It housed the Joo Chiat Library between 1949 and 1974. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

The idea of branch libraries came into focus once more. In May 1949, in response to a question raised during a Legislative Council meeting, the government again deferred plans for branch libraries, citing the need to appoint a qualified librarian to head the Raffles Library first.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, a working committee was formed in January 1950 to look into the improvement and extension of library services in Singapore, including the setting up of branch libraries.<sup>11</sup>

In the meantime, rather than wait for the Raffles Library to open a branch in the suburbs, the Department of Social Welfare and the British



Council established the Joo Chiat Library. Located in the new Joo Chiat Community Centre, it was opened on 9 August 1949 by Lady Gimson, wife of Governor Franklin Gimson.

“Through this library, people will obtain right reading and right companionship,” she said, “and this will inevitably lead to right thinking for the people of Singapore.” Membership was 10 cents a month for children and 25 cents for adults, with a \$1 deposit for a book. Despite the fees, the library gained more than 400 members within a month of its opening.<sup>12</sup>

Meanwhile, on 4 May 1950, the United States Information Service (USIS) Library in Raffles Place opened, becoming Singapore’s first free public library (the Raffles Library at the time was still subscription-based). The USIS Library was lauded for its accessible location and opening hours that catered to the working population.

The library was so highly anticipated that 55 people were waiting in line when it first opened, and the first person in the queue was given a free book. “[T]he American library must be welcomed as a valuable acquisition for Singapore,” the *Straits Times* reported. “The hunger for reading which has been manifested both in the adult population and in the schools since the war is attested by many observers, and the more libraries there are in this city the better.” Within weeks, the library had attracted 5,000 members.<sup>13</sup>

### Part-time Branch Libraries

The government finally approved the establishment of branch libraries in September 1951. Four branches would be opened at community centres under construction in the suburbs, each providing a selection of between 2,000 and 3,000 books comprising dictionaries, encyclopedias, directories, reference maps, English classics and literature, books on fiction, travel and adventure, periodicals and magazines, children’s titles, as well as publications in Chinese, Malay and Tamil.<sup>14</sup>

It would take another two years before the Raffles Library opened the first part-time branch library. It was located within the Social Welfare Centre on Lim Ah Pin Road in Upper Serangoon and began operations on 29 December 1953. “There are books for senior and junior readers as well as a small reference section,” Raffles Librarian Kay Hudson told the *Singapore Free Press*. “It’s starting in a small way – with about 2,000 books – but we have great hopes of it growing.”<sup>15</sup>

The library was only open four days a week, from 3 pm to 8 pm on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, and from 2 pm to 5 pm on Saturdays. “It’s unfortunate that we can’t open in the morning because the building is occupied by a children’s welfare centre,” said Hudson. According to Sunny Chiok Hock Siew, who managed the branch, another reason for the later opening hours was to cater to working adults who could only visit after work.<sup>16</sup>

To serve people living in the east, the Siglap Part-time Branch Library opened at the Social Welfare Centre, located at the junction of East Coast Road and Palm Road, six months later on 1 July 1954. This branch also operated only four days a week: from 3 pm to 8 pm on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays, and from 2 pm to 5 pm on Saturdays. The library proved popular with residents in the area. Hudson told the *Singapore Free Press*: “There are now some 80 senior and junior members and we have great hopes of it growing more.”<sup>17</sup>

Joo Chiat Library became the third part-time branch library on 1 October 1955 when it was handed over to the Raffles Library to manage. The library was opened three times a week on Mondays and Wednesdays (2 pm to 8 pm), and Saturdays (10 am to 5 pm).<sup>18</sup>

An opportunity arose for the Raffles Library to set up another branch in Yio Chu Kang when the library received a book gift from the principal of a Chinese school nearby. The fourth part-time branch library was officially opened at Yio Chu Kang Community Centre on 24 November 1956 by Chief Minister Lim Yew Hock.<sup>19</sup> It was also the first Chinese branch opened by the Raffles Library, with its collection comprising 1,000 titles in Chinese and 500 titles in English.<sup>20</sup>

Although part-time branch libraries did help to bring books to residents in rural areas, they also had shortcomings, particularly in terms of manpower and space constraints, noted Chan Thye Seng. Chan worked at part-time branches and later headed the Library Extension Services that oversaw the part-time branches and the mobile library service.<sup>21</sup>

He said that managing a branch was practically a one-man show. “You had to run the library all by yourself, doing two or three evenings a week and every Saturday afternoon for one full year. And I had to programme myself accordingly with time to shelf the collection, to shelf the books, to attend to circulation routines and answer readers’ enquiries.” Part-time branches were also reliant on the community centres to set aside space for them to operate and were typically not well equipped.<sup>22</sup>

Chan recalled that the Siglap branch was “just a classroom of less than 1,000 square feet” and shared the community centre with a dental clinic, kindergarten and community classes. Once, he had opened the library as usual until the closing time at 8 pm despite the building being “deathly still” because no one had informed him that the community centre was closed that day.<sup>23</sup>

Library users wrote in to the newspapers to voice their displeasure over the lack of space and the sparseness of the collections at part-time libraries. “At present the Joo Chiat Library looks more like a... hut than anything else. It needs repainting and definitely more chairs and tables,” complained Lynette in a letter to the *Straits Times* in July 1971. She added that she had to “mooch around for 1½ hours” before she could “run for an empty chair”.<sup>24</sup>

When the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Labour and Law took over the community centres at Upper Serangoon and Yio Chu Kang respectively in 1960, the two branches lost their space and were closed. Likewise, the Joo Chiat branch closed in 1974 when the community centre was demolished to make way for a larger and more modern building.<sup>25</sup>

The first part-time branch library in Upper Serangoon opened in December 1953. The library “saved book-lovers many a trip to the city library”. Image reproduced from “This Is a Happy Suburb and a Library Helps,” *Singapore Free Press*, 31 May 1954, 7. (From NewspaperSG).



# Bookworms' delight

S'pore's first library on void deck draws the holiday crowd

Singapore's first void-deck library at Whampoa has the happy crowds of avid readers who is expected to last.

In the past few weeks, with the school holidays, a total of 200 books was borrowed from the void-deck library and 100 from the other branch.

The library, a branch of the National Library, is at Block 73 in Whampoa Road. It has borrowed 100 books and 170 children at the moment.

The officer in charge, Miss Lim Mei Yik, said services will be providing services and programmes for the holiday season.



The Whampoa Part-time Branch Library in a void deck, 1981. Image reproduced from "Bookworms' Delight," *New Nation*, 16 December 1981, 8. (From NewspaperSG).

## Fulltime Branches

Singapore achieved internal self-government in May 1959, and in July that year, Minister for Culture S. Rajaratnam announced that the Raffles National Library (renamed in 1958 after the Raffles National Library Ordinance was passed)<sup>26</sup> would undergo a complete reorganisation of its administration and contents to make it "more reflective and representative of the people of this country" through the expansion of the Chinese, Malay and Tamil collections. A "greater decentralisation of the library facilities" was also on the horizon.<sup>27</sup>

In December 1960, Rajaratnam established a board for the National Library to make recommendations on the provision, regulation, extension and use of static and mobile library services to the public and government departments. Chaired by cinema magnate Loke Wan Tho, the board recommended the prioritisation of the expansion of library services to other areas of Singapore through decentralisation in four stages.<sup>28</sup>

In their report, the board acknowledged that the part-time branch library scheme was "valuable for the interim development", but it "does not consider that full scale development should take place there" because of two reasons: first, part-time branches were usually sited in areas with less traffic; and second, community centres were "fully committed" with sports, classes and other activities. The board recommended that branch libraries be built in their own spaces and serve users on a fulltime basis.<sup>29</sup>

With the board's recommendations, the National Library refocused its energy on building fulltime branch libraries in heavily populated areas, starting with the first satellite town of Queenstown in 1970, followed by Toa Payoh in 1974 and Marine Parade in 1978.<sup>30</sup>

Part-time libraries continued to play an important role by providing interim services to residents while housing estates and fulltime branches

were still in development. However, once fulltime libraries were up and running, the part-time branches were gradually phased out. The Siglap part-time branch, for example, closed in March 1981, three years after the Marine Parade Branch Library opened.<sup>31</sup>

## Moving into the Heartlands

The subsequent part-time libraries functioned as a transitory service and were primarily situated in the heartlands to be closer to the residents.

The fifth part-time branch, which opened at Block 28 Chai Chee Avenue in November 1974, became the largest part-time branch to date. It was also the first library to be housed within a rented shophouse owned by the Housing and Development Board (HDB).<sup>32</sup>

The sixth part-time branch began operations at the Jurong Town Community Centre on Yung An Road on 15 November 1977. The *New Nation* reported that although Jurong had a population of 90,000, only 80 people were members of the library. Due to low usage, the branch initially opened only on Tuesdays from 2 pm to 8 pm, with services later extended to Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, from 3 pm to 9 pm.

According to the National Library, the poor membership was attributed to the fact that "not many people were aware of its existence".<sup>33</sup> The part-time Jurong library ceased operations in May 1988 with the impending opening of the Jurong East Branch Library in August, becoming the final part-time branch library to close its doors.<sup>34</sup>

After structural issues were discovered in the shophouse it occupied, the Chai Chee branch was relocated to Block 209 Upper Changi Road in Bedok Town Centre in January 1981 where it became the seventh part-time branch – Bedok Part-time Branch Library.<sup>35</sup> Operating for just four years, the part-time library closed in August 1985 when the Bedok Branch Library opened in October the same year.<sup>36</sup>

The eighth and last part-time branch library opened at the void deck of Block 73 Whampoa Road, opposite the Whampoa Community Centre, on 1 October 1981. This also marked the first time that a library was situated in a void deck.

Within two weeks of its opening, 900 adults and 1,714 children joined as members and they borrowed a total of 4,302 and 9,053 books from the adults' and children's sections respectively. The Whampoa branch was operational almost daily except on Sundays, opening from 2 pm to 8 pm on Mondays, Wednesday and Fridays, and from 9 am to 6 pm on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays.<sup>37</sup>

However, by 1985, operating hours were halved due to dwindling usage.<sup>38</sup> The library eventually closed in July 1987 due to HDB's demolition exercise,

and users were urged to visit the Toa Payoh Branch Library that was nearby.<sup>39</sup>

In 1981, the National Library announced plans to open eight more fulltime branch libraries in various HDB estates over the next 11 years.<sup>40</sup> Part-time branch libraries were gradually phased out and the libraries in Whampoa and Jurong were the last to shut before the part-time library scheme fully gave way to fulltime branch libraries by the late 1980s.

For 30 years, part-time libraries brought books to the people and extended library services to neighbourhoods in the outlying areas. These libraries may be largely forgotten today but while they existed, they played an important role in supporting Singapore's push for literacy, education and economic development. ♦

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# BOOKS ON WHEELS

## SINGAPORE'S MOBILE LIBRARIES

Between the 1960s and 1980s, libraries-on-wheels were a familiar sight as they travelled around Singapore bringing books to residents in rural and suburban areas.

By Gracie Lee



Big Molly in the carpark next to Block 53 Marine Terrace, 30 March 2025. Photo by Jimmy Yap.

On 31 January 1959, the Singapore Constitution Exposition opened at the former Kallang Airport to much fanfare. The two-month-long event was organised to celebrate the establishment of the State of Singapore and the new Constitution, a major milestone in Singapore's transition to full internal self-government.<sup>1</sup>

Among the 600 exhibitors from commercial and government sectors, an unexpected attraction made its public debut: the Raffles National Library's mobile library van, which had been converted from a decommissioned army bus.<sup>2</sup> Together with part-time branch libraries, the mobile library service was part of the library's efforts to reach residents in outlying areas.

### Plans for a Mobile Library Service

Efforts to modernise the Raffles Library (renamed Raffles National Library in 1958 and National Library in 1960) began in the mid-1950s ahead of its redesignation as a national library. These included a new National Library building on Stamford Road slated for completion in 1960, and the formation of

the Library Extension Services comprising a mobile library service and part-time branch libraries.<sup>3</sup> (In 1956, the government had approved a mobile library service to "determine the needs of branch libraries".<sup>4</sup>)

The mobile van showcased at the exposition was procured through a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) grant of US\$2,000 in 1957 that was specifically designated for establishing mobile libraries for children. In addition to the van, the fleet also included two trailers that the library bought in 1959.<sup>5</sup>

The plan then was to dispatch these roving libraries to densely populated urban districts such as Tiong Bahru and Queenstown as well as to rural areas like Changi. "[The mobile libraries] will cater more for the non-English speaking people, for whom there were no adequate public library services at present," Minister for Culture S. Rajaratnam told the *Straits Times*.<sup>6</sup>

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Although the mobile library made its first public appearance in 1959, it was not immediately put to use due to the lack of qualified staff to drive and operate it. By then, it had become evident that the facilities at the Junior Library of the Raffles National Library were woefully inadequate to cope with the surge in borrowers after membership fees were abolished.<sup>7</sup> In the first two months of 1958 alone, new children's memberships tripled compared to the same period the previous year. The initial four months of 1959 saw a 69 percent increase in books borrowed by youths compared to the same period the year before. The demand was great as more than half of the population were under the age of 20 in 1957.<sup>8</sup>

### The Mobile Library Service Begins

In April 1960, Hedwig Anuar from the University of Malaya Library in Kuala Lumpur was seconded to the Raffles National Library in Singapore to oversee the opening of the new National Library building. Under her watch as director, the mobile library van finally took to the roads on 6 September 1960.<sup>9</sup>

After taking office, Anuar faced the closure of two of the four part-time branch libraries in Upper Serangoon and Yio Chu Kang when their premises were requisitioned by other government ministries. These closures affected the students who regularly used these branches and placed additional strain on the already overburdened library services at the National Library. In response, Anuar expedited the roll-out of the mobile library service to fill the void left by the closures and reach children in rural areas.<sup>10</sup>

The mobile library's maiden trip was to schools in the Naval Base area of Nee Soon. In the first two weeks, the van visited 37 schools in the outlying districts of Nee Soon, Sembawang, Jurong, Bukit Panjang and Tampines.<sup>11</sup> The distinctive cream-coloured van, with the licence plate SG 184 and "Raffles National Library – UNESCO" painted on its livery, could hold up to 2,000 books in English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil.<sup>12</sup>

"The response to the mobile library is overwhelming," said Anuar. "About 300 more children than the expected 2,000 have registered as members since it was started." The library announced plans to



Visitors queuing up to board the Raffles National Library's mobile library van at the Singapore Constitution Exposition, 1959. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

conduct fortnightly visits and to gradually extend the service to other schools. By 1962, the mobile library service boasted a membership of 5,000.<sup>13</sup>

Retired educator Koh Boon Loong, who used the mobile library as a primary schoolboy in the 1960s, shared his memories in his 2011 oral history interview. "A mobile library would come to the school, and we were allowed to go up to borrow books, class by class... You could only borrow, I think, either one or two books. We read it for about 3 weeks and then we return[ed] it to the teacher [who] would collect it so that they could give it [back] as a batch to the mobile library when they come by."<sup>14</sup>

In his 2002 oral history interview, former senior library staff Douglas Koh said that because the mobile library van was small, a temporary counter was typically set up outside. The children would first return their books, then board the van to select new ones. After disembarking, they would have their books issued and date-stamped. Although part of the mobile library's collection was routinely refreshed from the children's section of the main library, its offerings were modest owing to the van's limited capacity. Koh noted that this led to occasional grouses from frequent borrowers, who lamented that it was the "same same same collection".<sup>15</sup>



Schoolchildren queuing up to board the mobile library van at a school, 1962. Collection of the National Library Singapore.

Wong Heng, another former senior library staff, recalled that the van's interior was stripped bare to accommodate custom-built shelves. These shelves were designed with an upward tilt to prevent books from sliding off during transit. The front section of the vehicle housed the driver's seat and a small table for registration.<sup>16</sup>

### Hiatus and Resumption of Service

Unfortunately, despite the popularity of the mobile library, the service was discontinued in 1962 due to a staff shortage and insufficient funds to replace the worn-out books.<sup>17</sup> The arrival of Priscilla Taylor from New Zealand in April 1962 marked a turning point. Seconded as an advisor to the National Library under the Colombo Plan, Taylor assumed the directorship in August 1962 for two years. Having come from New Zealand, which had a robust mobile library system, Taylor was keen to revive the mobile library service during her tenure.<sup>18</sup>

In October 1963, library staff conducted surveys of community centres, where many residents gathered, to assess their suitability as potential branch libraries or bookmobile stops. This evaluation led to the launch of a pilot bookmobile service in July 1964 that operated weekly for two hours in Tanjong Pagar and West Coast community centres. According to Anuar, Tanjong Pagar was selected for its dense urban population and, being Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's constituency, offered valuable publicity. West Coast, on the other hand, was chosen for its rural demographics. The public response was encouraging, with 877 children borrowing 16,081 books in just six months.<sup>19</sup>

Nee Soon was added in May 1965, quickly becoming the busiest of the three service points, followed by Bukit Panjang in February 1966. The mobile library service received a significant boost in September 1965 when the New Zealand government provided a book grant of NZ\$10,000 under the Colombo Plan for the enhancement of the mobile library collection. This



Borrowing books in the mobile library van, 1962. Collection of the National Library Singapore.

donation funded the purchase of 23,519 books in 1966 for the two unused book trailers, facilitating the service's expansion.<sup>20</sup>

Chan Thye Seng, who received a Colombo Plan scholarship in 1962 to study librarianship in New Zealand, was given the task of expanding the mobile library service after returning to Singapore in 1963. Having seen rural library service firsthand, Chan spearheaded the development and growth of the service, becoming synonymous with Singapore's mobile library efforts in later years. He subsequently headed the Home Reading Division which managed the Library Extension Services.<sup>21</sup>

By 1967, the mobile library service had expanded rapidly, growing from four to 10 service points. The new locations were community centres in Chong Pang, Kaki Bukit, Kampong Tengah, Bukit Timah, Changi 10 milestone and Paya Lebar. The 10 mobile library service points and the two part-time branch libraries at Joo Chiat and Siglap accounted for nearly half of all children's book loans.<sup>22</sup>

To aid expansion, one of the two mobile library trailers, originally purchased in 1959, was finally deployed in 1967. An open garage was also constructed in the staff carpark at the National Library building to house the two trailers, which were previously stationed at the Kallang Depot of the Public Works Department (PWD).<sup>23</sup>

The mobile library service reached its peak between 1969 and 1973, operating 12 service points. In 1972, a mobile library bus was added to the fleet, and in December 1973, the Library Extension Services section moved from Stamford Road to the new Toa Payoh Branch Library. The mobile service was also streamlined, and several service points were relocated.<sup>24</sup>

The library staff enjoyed interacting with users of the mobile library service. "All the people who worked on the mobile library used to say they enjoyed it because the children would be so excited at having books brought to their doorstep," said Anuar. The mobile service, being a novelty, was popular with residents. "[F]or a lot of the rural people, it was the first time that they ever had access to books because they couldn't really

afford to buy books. So I think that was a big thing." A *Straits Times* article in 1979 recounted that "hordes of children [would] start gathering as the time approaches and there [would be] mad rush to be at the head of the queue when the [mobile library] van arrives".<sup>25</sup>

### Mobile Library Operations

In contrast to the earlier mobile library service that toured schools, the revived mobile library service operated weekly visits to community centres, mostly in the afternoon or evening.<sup>26</sup>

These visits were typically staffed by a lean team of three or four comprising a driver, a library officer and one or two clerical assistants. Back then, the road system was less developed, and travelling time and distances were much longer. To maximise efficiency and save on fuel, routes had to be carefully planned to incorporate two locations in one trip. For instance, if a visit to Bukit Panjang was made, a stop would be made at Bukit Timah too.<sup>27</sup>

Staff also had to maintain a large rotating stock of books, both fiction and non-fiction for children, young people and adults, in the four official languages, as well as materials for readers with limited literacy.<sup>28</sup>

To avoid long queues and slow service at each service point, library staff would unload the books from the mobile library van and display them on mobile racks or book trays in a space provided by the community centre. A temporary counter would be set up to record loans and returns. As these visits were weekly, children frequently found themselves borrowing books that their peers have returned. Adult borrowers, being fewer in number, continued to board the van for book selection.<sup>29</sup>

As the mobile library service developed, storytelling programmes were added to the offerings.<sup>30</sup> To boost publicity, the service was promoted through school talks, and also over radio and television.<sup>31</sup>

### Rain or Shine

Operating a mobile library service presented unique challenges. At times, the service had to be scaled back or suspended due to staff shortage, driver shortage, or vehicle breakdown.<sup>32</sup>

Chan Thye Seng, who led the expansion of the mobile library service, recalled the various difficulties that they had to overcome. "On one occasion, three out of the four male serving clerical assistants were called up for reservist training. On another, three of the four mobile library drivers vacated office."<sup>33</sup>

The mobile service was also at the mercy of inclement weather. "Once there was an island-wide flood in 1969, and the stalled vehicle had to be towed back from the outlying area to the PWD workshop at Kallang," Chan recalled. "There was quite a queue and long wait for repairs and servicing, as priority was given to ambulances and police patrol cars." Instead of disappointing the people and children who would wait expectantly for the arrival of the van, Chan said that staff would hire two to three taxis to transport the books to the

location. "Rain or shine, the service had to continue!"<sup>34</sup>

Another problem was getting drivers for the trailers. Chan recalled: "Although we had four drivers and one van, I had to get these drivers on the road to drive these trailers and the drivers refused to drive. They said because these are heavy vehicles, we are general purpose drivers. We need certain extra allowances, and we also need to be trained. So, I arranged for the PWD to train up the drivers to drive the heavy vehicles." Their salaries were also increased.<sup>35</sup>

### Phasing Out Mobile Libraries

In 1973, because of government efforts to curb inflation and to manage the global energy crisis, the National Library was tasked with evaluating the efficiency of its mobile library service. The goal was to potentially reduce or relocate the existing 12 service points. The relocation of the Library Extension Services section to Toa Payoh Branch Library also provided an opportunity to streamline mobile library operations. Consequently, in 1974, three service points – Pasir Panjang, Changi 10 milestone and Serangoon Gardens – were shut down.<sup>36</sup>



Children reading inside the mobile library van at the opening of the mobile library service point at Paya Lebar Community Centre, 1967. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

As families in rural areas were increasingly resettled in new towns, the need for mobile libraries declined. While these had once been vital, they were less cost-effective and offered readers a smaller selection of materials than permanent branch libraries. In 1979, a fulltime planning officer was appointed to revise the library development plan. The aim was to phase out mobile and part-time libraries, and replace them with fulltime branch libraries. The new plan envisioned eight branch libraries within the next 11 years in the housing estates of Ang Mo Kio, Jurong, Bedok, Geylang East, Hougang, Tampines, Nee Soon and Woodlands.<sup>37</sup>

Children browsing books at the opening of the mobile library service point at Kaki Bukit Community Centre, 1967. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.





The interior of the mobile library bus, 1975. Collection of the National Library Singapore.

Under this strategic shift, no new mobile service points were added except for Ang Mo Kio where a mobile library service point was established to provide interim services until the completion of the Ang Mo Kio Branch Library. On 14 January 1991, the mobile library service, along with its six remaining service points at Choa Chu Kang, Nee Soon, Punggol, Changkat, Tanjong Pagar and Woodlands, ceased operations after 26 years of service.<sup>38</sup>

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## Molly the Mobile Library

The idea of a mobile library service was too good to be mothballed forever though. On 3 April 2008, the National Library Board (NLB) launched Molly, a new mobile library service, to better reach disadvantaged and underserved communities. At the opening ceremony held at Pathlight School, Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports Vivian Balakrishnan said: "The challenge today is not the physical availability of libraries, but rather, reaching out and making sure that people who can benefit from the access to books know about it and are given the access to it."<sup>39</sup>

Molly, retrofitted from a former SBS transit bus, was installed with modern library technology such as borrowing stations and e-kiosks for onboard transactions. It was the world's first fully wireless-enabled mobile library bus where transactions could be carried out digitally. The bus, which carried approximately 3,000 books, made visits to special-education schools, homes and orphanages, welfare homes and volunteer welfare organisations. Beyond lending books, Molly offered storytelling sessions and user education workshops, and participated in community outreach events. In its first year of operations, Molly served 45,114 visitors from 17 special

needs schools, 16 homes and orphanages and 30 primary schools. In 2011, the Molly bus was retired and replaced the following year with an upgraded model that had iPads with e-books and a wheelchair ramp.<sup>40</sup>

With donations from the Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple, the service expanded in May 2014 with two mini mobile library vans, known as Mini Mollys. These scaled-down versions of the Molly bus can hold up to 1,500 books and navigate narrow driveways and parking lots in small housing estates. They primarily serve kindergartens and childcare centres in housing estates as well as welfare homes that could not be reached by the bigger Molly. During these visits, children's activities such as storytelling, arts and craft workshops and sing-along sessions are also conducted. Each year, Mini Mollys bring books and library programmes to 48,000 children from 160 preschools.<sup>41</sup>

In September 2016, a new vehicle known as "Big Molly", also sponsored by the temple, replaced the 2012 Molly bus which was decommissioned. This newer version carries up to 3,000 books and features enhanced accessibility, including a hydraulic wheelchair lift to serve wheelchair users and book stations placed at a lower height for children to borrow and return books on their own. Today, Big Molly

visits special needs schools, homes and orphanages, welfare homes, lower-income groups and housing estates. It also conducts weekend outreach events in residential estates across Singapore.<sup>42</sup> ♦

A storytelling session in Mini Molly, 2014. Collection of the National Library Board.



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# READING WITH MOLLY TODAY

According to a study, the mobile library service continues to be relevant as it helps children get more access to books.

By Loh Chin Ee and Koh Yu Qun



Nur Yarah (left) with her mother Jannah Belhida and sister Nur Farasha, 12 April 2025. Photo by Jimmy Yap.

**M**olly, the mobile library service by the National Library Board (NLB), continues to serve the Singapore community today by bringing books to schools and neighbourhoods. The service operates in two forms: a Big Molly bus and two Mini Mollys.

The library service is supported by donations from the Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple. Mini Mollys were introduced in 2014 to serve preschools under two schemes run by the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) as well as children from lower-income households.<sup>1</sup>

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Rolled out in 2016, the larger Big Molly serves disadvantaged communities such as individuals from orphanages, rental flats and welfare homes by bringing reading materials and library services to them. Big Molly visits neighbourhoods like Nee Soon,<sup>2</sup> Punggol and Whampoa<sup>3</sup> among many other heartlands and estates in Singapore on weekends,<sup>4</sup> and special education schools and primary schools on weekdays.

Having access to a wide variety of books is a crucial factor to cultivate the joy of reading.<sup>5</sup> Bringing Molly to neighbourhoods that include families living in rental flats is one way to ensure low-income families have access to books, narrowing the physical distance to public library resources.

Between October 2023 and June 2024, in a study supported by the NLB, a research team from the National Institute of Education (NIE), Nanyang Technological University (NTU) studied whether visits by children from families living in rental flats to Molly over the six-month period would see any improvements in their reading enjoyment, frequency of reading and language proficiency.

The NIE researchers first conducted a door-to-door reading survey with families with young children across two rental blocks in Punggol. Findings from the survey showed that parents believe that reading is important for their children. However, most families had fewer than 20 physical books at home and even less access to electronic books. While these families knew about the public library, about half of them did not visit the library at all, in part due to lack of time from work commitments, health issues or caring for multiple children. For those who visited, some were not inclined to borrow books as they were worried about book damage or incurring fines, preferring to read in the library instead.

In the second part of the study, the researchers shortlisted and invited several families with children between the ages of 4 and 9 to commit to visiting Molly two times a month over six months (“the intervention”). The children took the Singapore Multilingual Assessment of Receptive Vocabulary (SMARV) test to assess their vocabulary and a print recognition test to evaluate their familiarity with common titles read by children of their age, before and after the intervention.

A reading survey was also conducted with the children before the intervention and after the six months. The children were asked a number of questions about their reading enjoyment, their experience of

attending storytelling sessions in Big Molly and their opinions on the Molly bus in general. Their parents were also interviewed, with questions centring around their experience of the Molly bus and any observed changes in their children’s attitudes and behaviours before and after the intervention.

The study had begun with eight families with a total of 11 children but five children dropped out. Four children were regular users, visiting Molly almost every two weeks, while the other two visited once a month. Time, conflicting schedules and lack of childcare arrangements for younger siblings were reasons that one family gave for dropping out.

Children who continued participating in the project benefited from their visits to Molly. Out of the six children, three saw an increase in their English vocabulary test scores post-intervention and four improved in their print recognition of common book titles read by children within their age group. However, the sample size is too small for these results to be conclusive.

More importantly, parents told us that their children now had access to more books, enjoyed reading more and read more frequently. During the six-month period, researchers observed that the children enjoyed the storytelling sessions on the bus, became more familiar with different book titles and borrowed books regularly.

An incidental but crucial discovery was that parents themselves appreciated the team’s support to visit Molly. Posters with the dates of Molly visits were given to families and pasted at lift lobbies. Reminders via WhatsApp were also sent to parents, helping them prioritise time for visiting Molly.

During Molly visits, researchers provided information about library loan periods and taught parents how to use the NLB app to extend loans using their mobile phones. Knowing about these procedures and learning how to use the technology helped parents feel at ease and more likely to borrow books for their children.

Nur Maya Edora, 7, is an avid reader both at home and in school. A library enthusiast, Maya often bugs her mother, Nur Hirma Sheeryn, to take her and her siblings to Punggol Regional Library, the library nearest to their residence. However, due to childcare reasons, travelling to the library as a family can be challenging for them.

Molly’s regular visits to their neighbourhood in Punggol allowed the family to visit and experience the library with convenience due to its proximity to their home. During the six months, Maya not only borrowed books for herself, but also picked out books for her younger sister. When asked how often she would like to visit Molly, Maya said: “I wish like every day.”

Nur Yarah is a bubbly 9-year-old and one of the most regular visitors to Molly. Jannah Belhida, her mother, found out about the bus through her friend and decided to take Yarah and her 3-year-old sister, Nur Farasha, to the bus to find out more. An advantage of regular visits to Molly was that it provided a Saturday routine for the family and gave Yarah access to new



Nur Maya Edora and her dad Kamarul Ariffin Hasrat Ali, 12 April 2025. Photo by Jimmy Yap.

books. Yarah told us: “I now read before bed all the time. I will ask my mummy if there’s the library bus. I’m pretty disappointed if she says no.” After the intervention, Jannah decided to take the children to the nearby Punggol Regional Library as she preferred the huge selection of library books and the numerous activities for her children.

Originally an effort to bring library services to children living in rural districts, NLB’s mobile library service today continues its aims to of making library services more accessible to Singapore’s children. The study highlights that regular visits to Molly can empower low-income families by giving them more access to books, improving their children’s reading enjoyment and frequency, and directing them to public library services.

Working together with community partners to help these families become familiar with the Molly bus and establishing regular visits is one way to give our children a headstart in their reading journey. ♦

This study is conducted by researchers from the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, in partnership with the National Library Board, and supported by the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore, under the Social Mobility Foundation Grant. To read the study, please visit <https://hdl.handle.net/10497/29434>.

## NOTES

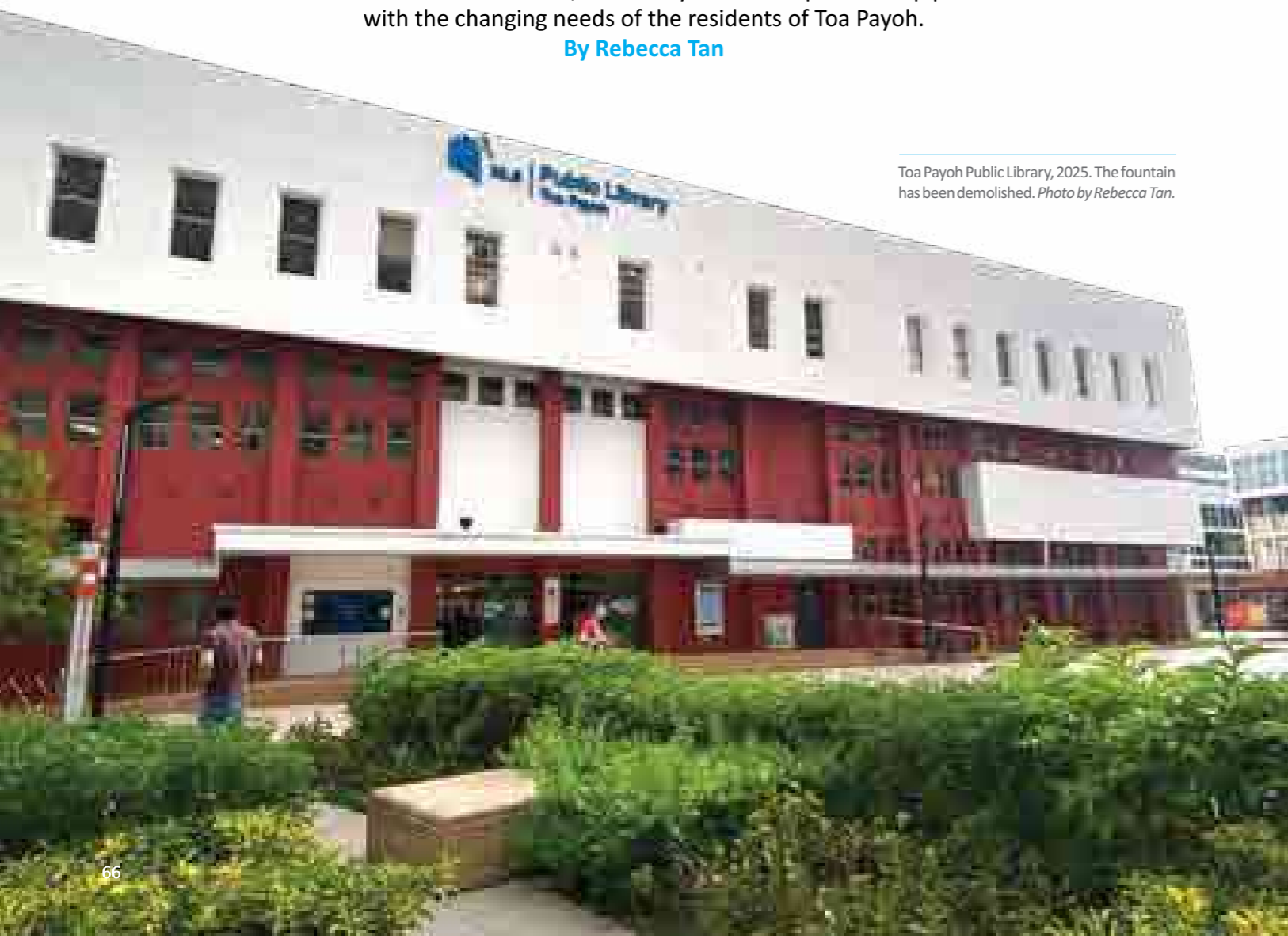
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# Pages of Progress

## The Toa Payoh Public Library

Over the last five decades, the library has developed to keep pace with the changing needs of the residents of Toa Payoh.

By Rebecca Tan



Toa Payoh Public Library, 2025. The fountain has been demolished. Photo by Rebecca Tan.



The round pool with a fountain in front of the Toa Payoh Branch Library, 1974. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

A little over 50 years have passed since Toa Payoh Public Library opened its doors in 1974. Today, the building has become a landmark in the area. Built in what was then a young and growing town, the library is the second branch of the National Library after the first in Queenstown in 1970.<sup>1</sup> With its distinctive facade and location in the heart of Toa Payoh, the library has served generations of patrons.

### The Right Place

Much work went into selecting the site of the library. Chan Thye Seng, a National Library officer and chairman of the Toa Payoh Branch Library building committee, noted in his oral history interview: “I remember we went out to the site and that time, the [Toa Payoh] town centre was just like a desert... probably there were some residential flats there but not all those restaurants, community centres, churches, they were all non-existent at that time. And I remember we had to use a minivan to drive in. There was not even a proper macadamised road to reach the site.”<sup>2</sup>

Tan Beng Kiat, the Public Works Department chief of building works, showed the committee the plan of Toa Payoh town centre. “Restaurants, theatres, and there [were] two sides, one facing the fountain and the other side where it’s currently the famous Chinese restaurant or cinema or McDonald’s, and we were given either one of these,” said Chan. Upon Tan’s advice, the committee chose the side that “faces the fountain across the main road, which is a more commanding side”. Chan noted that the topmost floor of the library could serve as the viewing

tower for royalty or foreign VIPs, as they would have a good view of the entire town.<sup>3</sup>

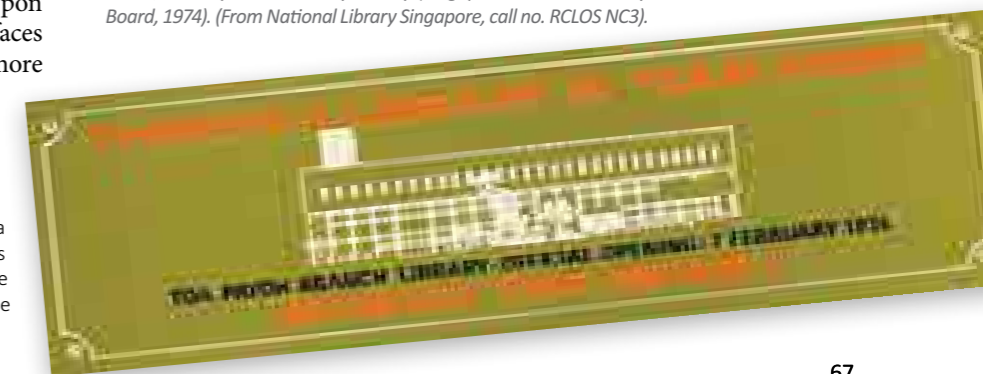
The committee also planned the new and existing facilities that the library would house. Interestingly, in addition to operating as a public library for patrons, the Toa Payoh Library was envisaged as the headquarters of the Library Extension Services comprising the mobile library service and part-time branch libraries. Part of the space would be set aside to keep inventory for the mobile library.<sup>4</sup> “The aim of the mobile library service was to take the books out to the schools and the community so that children could borrow books from the mobile libraries,” said Amarjeet Gill, who headed Toa Payoh Library from 1993 to 1994.<sup>5</sup>

### SEAP Games Secretariat

Before it opened, the library building served as the secretariat of the 7th South East Asian Peninsular (SEAP) Games, held for the first time in Singapore in September 1973.<sup>6</sup>

Included in the invitation packet to guests for the opening ceremony of Toa Payoh Branch Library on 7 February 1974 was a bookmark promoting the new library. Image reproduced from National Library Board, Toa Payoh Community Library (Singapore: National Library Board, 1974). (From National Library Singapore, call no. RCLOS NC3).

Rebecca Tan is a Children and Teens Librarian at Toa Payoh Public Library. She develops content and services for children and teens, and works with schools to promote a culture of reading. She was previously a Digital Heritage Librarian with the National Library Singapore.



While the government had already accepted a tender valued at \$1,233,989 in early 1973 for the building of Toa Payoh Branch Library, work was halted for one month for the SEAP games. Chan explained: “It was probably the largest non-residential building in the area, bigger than any restaurant or cinema at that time. There were hardly any buildings around except for the flats where the sportsmen were housed.”<sup>7</sup>

After the last of the 1,500 SEAP Games competitors left on 11 September 1973, the only activity that remained in the Games Village was at the secretariat building. It functioned until 15 September while officials sorted out “the aftermath of the seven-day event”.<sup>8</sup>

### A New Page in History

The Toa Payoh Branch Library officially opened on 7 February 1974, with Cheong Kwai Liew as its first head.<sup>9</sup> The opening ceremony included a lion dance and the unveiling of a plaque (which is still located at the entrance of the library today). In the invite that was sent out was a bookmark with the text, “There’s a library in your midst. Spread the news!”<sup>10</sup> The festivities continued after the opening with programmes such as music performances, choral readings, film shows, a musical night and a magic show.<sup>11</sup>

Although Minister for Culture Jek Yeun Thong was scheduled to open the library, he was unable to attend and Haji Sha’ari Tadin, senior parliamentary secretary for the Ministry of Culture, delivered Jek’s speech on the minister’s behalf.

“The completion of the Toa Payoh Branch Library marks yet another stage in the development of the [National] Library’s facilities,” the speech read. “It will not only serve the reading requirements of the people of Toa Payoh, but will also serve as the headquarters of other services such as the popular mobile service as well as service to part-time branches, and to residents’ associations, social welfare homes, clubs and other institutions and associations.” It was Jek’s hope that the library would be an “incentive for all to renew their acquaintance with books and thus broaden their horizons and knowledge”.<sup>12</sup>

The library proved to be very popular with residents, especially children. A *New Nation* article from 1974 reported that about three-quarters of its total membership consisted of children, and in March 1974, its 9,744 child members borrowed a total of 53,950 books. The article noted that this figure was “much higher than comparative figures from the Central Library and the older Queenstown branch”.<sup>13</sup>

Interestingly, studying was not allowed in the library back then. The library published a

Toa Payoh Community Library after a major revamp in 1998. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

brochure titled “Study Rooms in Community Centres Near the Toa Payoh Branch Library”. It noted that the library’s main objective “is to serve members of the public, including students, who wish to borrow books or consult library materials. It is not equipped to serve those who wish to use the premises for studying their own books or notes”.<sup>14</sup> (In 2003, the National Library Board “relocated on its ‘no studying’ policy”).<sup>15</sup>

The popularity of the library can be seen in the fact that it increased the seating capacity of the adult and young people’s reading room from 180 to 220, and extended its operating hours from 50 to 63 hours the same year it opened. Two years later, in 1976, the library purchased a hundred more chairs.<sup>16</sup> (Today, the library opens 77 hours per week from 10 am to 9 pm Monday through Sunday.)

In 1984, Toa Payoh Library celebrated its 10th anniversary with a stamp exhibition, a book display and a film show in its lecture hall.<sup>17</sup> Programmes for its 20th anniversary in 1994 included an exhibition about Toa Payoh town as well as prizes and souvenirs sponsored by Philips Singapore, which had a big factory in the area.<sup>18</sup> Gill, the branch head at the time, recalled: “We tried to make it as much a community event as we could. The library staff organised programmes and storytelling contests, put up posters, offered bookmarks and badges, and even designed a 20th anniversary celebration logo for the publicity materials. Even the McDonald’s located near the library sponsored breakfast meals for patrons who borrowed a certain number of books.” She said: “I think the staff were excited because when we did events, we just made do with what we had. This time, we had funding on a larger scale to do more than the usual things.”<sup>19</sup>

### New Again

Over time, the Toa Payoh Library began to add new facilities. Air-conditioning was installed in 1982.<sup>20</sup> A lift was subsequently added in 1985. “I will be able to use the books in the reference room, the audio-visual, and the microfilm reader. It will also be easier for me to attend talks at the lecture hall on the second floor,” said Chee Yuan Cheow, a wheelchair user who had requested the lift. The \$77,000 lift became operational in December 1985.

Chee was very grateful to the library. “Previously, the library staff had to go up and down the stairs



to bring me the catalogue drawers. And after I had selected the book, they had to go back to look for them. Now, I can get the books myself,” he said.<sup>21</sup>

On 1 September 1995, the National Library became a statutory board – the National Library Board (NLB) – and all branch libraries were renamed community libraries and branch heads became known as managers.<sup>22</sup> To keep up with the times, Toa Payoh Community Library underwent a major revamp in 1998 and reopened the following year. Hajbee Abu Bakar, who was the library manager from 1994 to 2000, noted that the library needed “more than a few computers and television sets to keep up with the quality of services offered at newer libraries like the Cheng San community library”. These were used by patrons to access the library’s digital content and surf the Internet.<sup>23</sup>

During peak hours and on weekends, the average queuing time for patrons was 30 minutes to an hour as library staff manually handled the borrowing and returning of books. The introduction of self-check counters was anticipated to reduce the waiting time to no more than 15 minutes.<sup>24</sup>

As part of the \$3-million makeover, services and facilities for different age groups were refreshed, and technological innovations like multimedia stations were implemented. A new service was ONE Learning Place, an information technology training centre on the third floor. It provided information literacy programmes and internet classes for students and adults. A Senior Citizens’ Corner was also created – with comfortable sofas and chairs, large-print collections and a multimedia station – for elderly patrons to read, meet and interact with friends.<sup>25</sup>

“We have quite a number of senior citizens at this branch,” noted Hajbee. “We thought it would be a good idea to set aside a corner for them where they can do their reading quietly.” “There is really no age limit to our library users,” said Ngian Lek Choh, director of

Sha’ari Tadin, senior parliamentary secretary for the Ministry of Culture, tours Toa Payoh Branch Library after its opening ceremony, 1974. On the left is Hedwig Anuar, director of the National Library. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.





**(Left)** The children's section with the honeycomb design on the wall, ceiling and furniture, 2025. Photo by Rebecca Tan.

**(Bottom)** A seating area on the first floor of the library, 2025. Photo by Rebecca Tan.

The library became the “first among the community libraries” to have a cafe with the opening of Délifrance on its premises.<sup>27</sup> “It is a lifestyle change,” noted Hajbee. “People just feel that it is so nice to have a cafe in the library area.”<sup>28</sup>

### The Library Today

As Toa Payoh Community Library entered the new millennium, it continued to serve the public and create new memories for both staff and patrons. Roy Won, who worked there as a librarian from 2001 to 2005, noted that the library saw a change in visitor demographics after the headquarters of the Housing & Development Board (HDB) moved from Bukit Merah to Toa Payoh in 2002. He said: “When the HDB came to Toa Payoh, our loans went up and there were more young professionals visiting the library. During lunchtime, you would see people in formal office attire browsing in the library.”<sup>29</sup>

In 2008, as part of a rebranding exercise by the NLB, all community libraries were renamed public libraries. Toa Payoh Community Library became known as Toa Payoh Public Library.<sup>30</sup>

Today, the facilities in the library have changed too. While there is no longer a cafe, the library is co-located with Computhink Kids SG, an enrichment centre offering coding classes for children. Patrons can reserve library seats in advance using NLB's seat booking system and enjoy ample areas for self-study. The staff of Toa Payoh Public Library have also developed a new initiative called Toa Payoh Toilet Reads, where summaries of interesting books are pasted on toilet cubicle doors, allowing people to discover new reads in a unique manner. Staff also share their favourite reads and book reviews via posters displayed throughout the library.

Over the years, many current staff have had stints at Toa Payoh Public Library. For example, Raneetha Rajaratnam, NLB's current director for programmes and services, started her career as a librarian there from 1997 to 1999. “Toa Payoh [was] my first posting when I joined NLB,” she said. “I was a ‘green sponge’, excitedly absorbing everything.” Siti Komsah Sudi, who worked as a library officer at Toa Payoh Public Library from 1995 to 2023, said: “Toa Payoh Library is special to me because my own children have grown up together with the library. When they were young, they frequented the library while I was working and although they don't visit

me in the library as much now, the library reminds me of how it has grown with my kids.”<sup>31</sup>

me in the library as much now, the library reminds me of how it has grown with my kids.”<sup>31</sup>

### Looking Ahead

In February 2023, it was announced that Toa Payoh Public Library would be moving to a new integrated development by 2030. To be located on a 12-hectare plot of land between Lorong 6 Toa Payoh and the Pan Island Expressway, the integrated development will house other amenities such as a polyclinic, swimming pools, indoor sports halls, fitness studios, a gymnasium and even a football stadium.<sup>32</sup>

“We look forward to working with partners and the community to build a bigger library in Toa Payoh that complements the integrated hub,” said Ng Cher Pong, NLB's chief executive officer. “We will also find new ways to offer services that will enhance the experience of our patrons. This is in line with our LAB25 (Libraries and Archives Blueprint 2025) goal to work with partners, to evolve and innovate libraries and archives in order to better serve our patrons.”

Even as the library moves to a new home, its proximity to sports facilities will continue to reflect the library's association with sporting heritage and serve as a reminder of its long history.<sup>33</sup> ♦

Public Library Services. “A large group of our users are children, teenagers and young adults, and now we want to encourage more older people to come.”<sup>26</sup>

The Children's Section was refreshed with a “Treasure Island” theme and ark-shaped shelves. Other new services included borrowers' enquiry terminals for patrons to check their loan records and make payments. There were also self-service borrowing stations and InfoXpress terminals where patrons could “get answers to frequently asked questions and reference resources about Singapore”.



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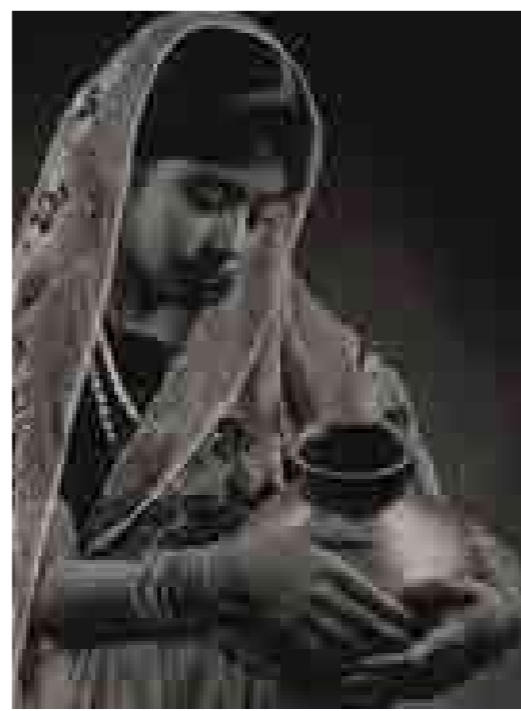
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**(Left)** Run Run Shaw (left) and Runme Shaw (right) were collectively known as the Shaw brothers. They were the pioneers of the film and entertainment industry in Singapore and Malaya. *Studio De Luxe Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 20250000067 - 0002).*

**(Below)** Portrait of a child taken at Studio De Luxe. This is but one of the many artistic poses of P.S. Teo's subjects for their studio photos. *Studio De Luxe Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 20250000067 - 0001).*

**(Bottom)** Wedding photo of Neo Chwee Kok. He was nicknamed "The Flying Fish" for his exploits in the swimming pool during the Asian Games in 1951 in New Delhi, where he won four gold medals. *Studio De Luxe Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 20250000067 - 0008).*



# A TALE OF TWO CITIES

Singapore Through the Lens of **P.S. Teo** and **Ronni Pinsler**

The photographs by P.S. Teo and Ronni Pinsler of a bygone Singapore form part of the National Archives of Singapore's 5.5-million strong collection.  
**By Lu Wenshi and Ronnie Tan**

**Lu Wenshi** is a Senior Manager with the National Archives of Singapore, who has an innate interest in photographs, old and contemporary. She oversees the speeches and press release collections, content curation and crowdsourcing for the Archives Services department.

**Ronnie Tan** is a Senior Archivist with the National Archives of Singapore, who has a keen interest in photography and history. He was previously a Senior Manager (Research) with the National Library Singapore, where he conducted research on public policy, library-related topics as well as historical research, including the Malayan Emergency (1948–60) and military history.

Photographs of people generally fall into one of two categories. The first is a carefully staged, posed photograph of the subject, typically in controlled situations. The other is a candid shot of the subject in action, whether he or she is aware of the photographer or not. While these approaches have very different outcomes, both types of photographs in the National Archives of Singapore (NAS) are of interest to historians and history enthusiasts.

The former category of photographs is found in the Studio De Luxe Collection, captured by P.S. Teo, while the latter category makes up the bulk of the Ronni Pinsler Collection. These photos are available on Archives Online (<https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/>), the portal of the NAS providing access to photographs, maps, building plans, oral history interviews, audiovisual recordings and other archival records of Singapore.



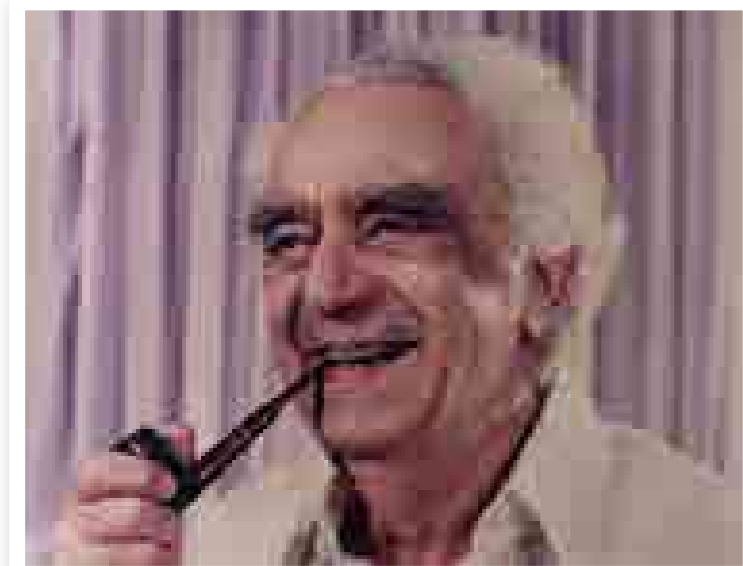
**(Top)** A woman with food offerings riding in a trishaw on her way to the temple on Duxton Road for the birthday celebration of Guan Yin, Goddess of Mercy, 1980. *Ronni Pinsler Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19990008731 - 0068).*

**(Above)** A hawker's three-wheeled vehicle laden with wares such as brooms, brushes, fans, feather dusters, plastic basins and scoops, 1980s. *Ronni Pinsler Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19990007084 - 003).*

**(Left)** An elderly hawker heading towards Kampong River Valley Close, 1980. *Ronni Pinsler Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19990007453 - 099).*

## P.S. Teo, Studio Photographer

Before the advent of compact cameras, the photo studio was where most people were photographed, especially if portraits were needed. An individual might want or need a portrait, newlyweds would typically desire a wedding photograph to display at home, and families would take photographs, perhaps to mark a momentous event like a graduation or an addition to the family.



(Top) P.S. Teo with his mother, undated. *Courtesy of the family of P.S. Teo.*

(Above) Photos taken by Studio De Luxe were largely in black and white, before the advent of colour photography. This portrait of Singapore's first chief minister, David Marshall, was among the first few portraits taken in colour. *Studio De Luxe Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 20250000067 - 0007).*

(Right) Chan Choy Siong, wife of Ong Pang Boon, the first minister for home affairs. She was a city councillor, a member of the Legislative Assembly and member of parliament for Delta constituency. She was instrumental in setting up the People's Action Party Women's League (now known as the PAP Women's Wing) and pushed for the passage of the Women's Charter and monogamous marriages. *Studio De Luxe Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 20250000067 - 0006).*

In 2007, the family of the late award-winning photographer Teo Poh Seng donated 26,000 negatives and photographs to the National Archives. Teo Poh Seng, or P.S. Teo as he was professionally known, was famous for capturing artistic black-and-white portraits of prominent people in Singapore, including supreme court judges, politicians, businessmen and local artistes.<sup>1</sup>

Born in 1930 in Sibul, Sarawak, Teo was the eldest of eight children. His father Teo Chong Kim, also known as Teo Chong Khim or C.K. Teo, and mother Lim Geok Lian relocated to Singapore in 1934.<sup>2</sup>

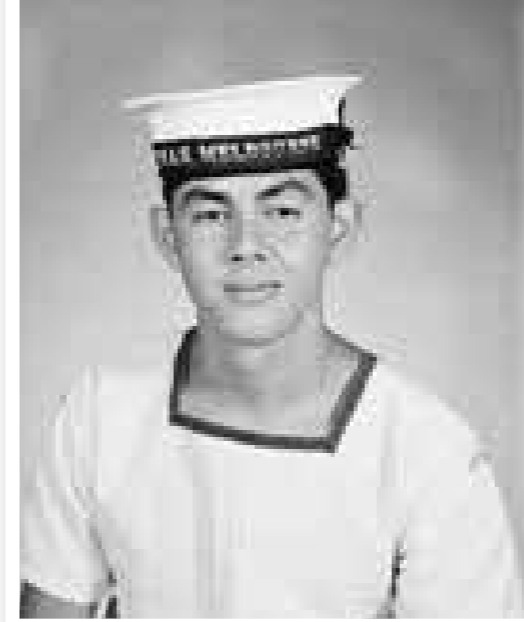
The family lived in Outram. Teo Chong Kim worked as a manager at the Great World Amusement Park on Kim Seng Road until the outbreak of World War II. The Teo family then moved to Pek San Teng village off Thomson Road where the senior Teo became a farmer during the Japanese Occupation.<sup>3</sup>

After the war, Teo Chong Kim found work as a clerk at Jazz Studio along North Bridge Road. When Jazz Studio expanded and set up Studio De Luxe at 33 Stamford Road, which opened for business on 16 February 1946, Teo Chong Kim became its manager. The studio provided both indoor and outdoor photography services. (The premises of the studio is today part of Hotel Kempinski.)

P.S. Teo was enrolled at St Anthony Boys' School and then at Anglo-Chinese School, Coleman Street. As a schoolboy, he was already helping out at Studio De Luxe. Besides doing odd jobs such as sweeping and washing the floor, Teo also observed and assisted the chief photographer and his father, who handled the lighting.

After completing his secondary school education in 1949, Teo joined his father at Studio De Luxe. Not long after, the owner of Studio De Luxe migrated to Taiwan and sold his share in the business to Teo's father.<sup>4</sup>

Encouraged by his father, Teo took up a correspondence course at the Alpha School of Photography in London in 1952. He also subscribed to photography magazines and read books by well-known photographers such as Yousuf Karsh and Francis Wu, who both specialised in portraits; Wellington Lee, who did portrait and commercial



work; and renowned landscape photographer Ansel Adams. Teo also participated in photography competitions and won awards.

Teo was a master of his trade.<sup>5</sup> He started taking photographs of notable people when he was only in his early 20s. He directed people like prominent businessmen, judges and politicians on how to pose.<sup>6</sup> He took portraits of well-known personalities of the time – colonial judges, sultans, presidents, prime ministers and artistes including Rathi Karthigesu, a well-known classical Indian dancer and wife of Justice M. Karthigesu, a former High Court judge. Wedding photography was his specialty. The wedding photograph of Neo Chwee Kok, who, to date, is the only local swimmer to have won four gold medals in the Asian Games (an achievement that took place in 1951), is included in Studio De Luxe's collection with the NAS.



(Above) Rathi Karthigesu, a well-known classical Indian dancer and wife of Justice M. Karthigesu, a former High Court judge. *Studio De Luxe Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 20250000067 - 0005).*

(Top left) A sailor with the Royal Australian Navy serving onboard the Australian warship HMAS Melbourne. *Studio De Luxe Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 20090000121 - 0004).*

(Left) This photo shows the sharp contrast in nurses' uniforms in the 1960s and 1970s compared with the uniforms worn by nurses today. An obvious difference is that nurses today do not wear the headdress, also known as the nursing cap. *Studio De Luxe Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 20090000122 - 0003).*

As the eldest son, Teo set aside his personal ambitions to help care for his younger siblings. "He had worked so hard throughout his life, taking care of his parents and siblings," said his siblings in the book, *P.S. Teo, Photographer (1930–2005)*. "He did not take any holidays and never visited his country [sic] of birth, Sarawak... [w]hile we, his siblings received tertiary and professional qualifications with his financial support and went through the usual education system."<sup>7</sup>

Studio De Luxe remained at Stamford Road for four decades until Teo's father died following a short illness in 1986. As the property was rent-controlled and under his father's name, Teo could not continue operating there. Seeing how much the business meant to him, his siblings pooled their resources together to relocate the studio to 17C Lorong Liput in Holland Village, where he worked till his health failed him. So committed was he to his craft that even when he was very ill with terminal cancer, his "[p]rofessionalism and responsibility to his clients were uppermost on his mind."<sup>8</sup>

Teo, who never married, died on 11 February 2005, at the age of 75.



Samsui women on the back of a lorry, c. 1980. The one in front is covering her face. Ronni Pinsler Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 20090000104 - 0173).

### Ronni Pinsler, Street Photographer

While the Studio De Luxe Collection consists of studio photographs, the Ronni Pinsler Collection is very different. Pinsler was a diamond trader by profession who started taking photographs as a hobby.

Born in 1950 in Singapore to British parents of Romanian descent, Pinsler's collection of more than 16,000 photographs of everyday scenes in Singapore from the 1970s to the mid-1990s have been on permanent loan to the NAS since the 1990s. He also meticulously captioned each photograph, a process which took him over a year.<sup>9</sup>

Pinsler's early life in Singapore was interrupted by his studies in England at age 9, before returning to work in his family's diamond trading business when he was 21. He then got to know Hans Hofer, a travel guide writer and photographer, who taught him the basics of creative photography.<sup>10</sup>

Armed with an eye for detail and his trusty Leica camera, Pinsler travelled around the island, visiting Chinese temples and documenting the street scenes of Singapore. "I always kept the camera in my bag with the diamonds and cash I collected from my day job. I would stop by temples and just *kaypoh* [Hokkien for 'busybody']," he said in an interview with the *Straits Times* in 2024.<sup>11</sup>

Pinsler's collection includes significant photographs of Chinese customs, festivals and the birthdays of various gods. He attributed his interest

in all things Chinese to Ah Toh, the Cantonese *majie* (domestic helper) employed to look after him. As his parents travelled a lot for work, he would accompany Ah Toh to her village in Changi to attend festivals and temple celebrations.<sup>12</sup>

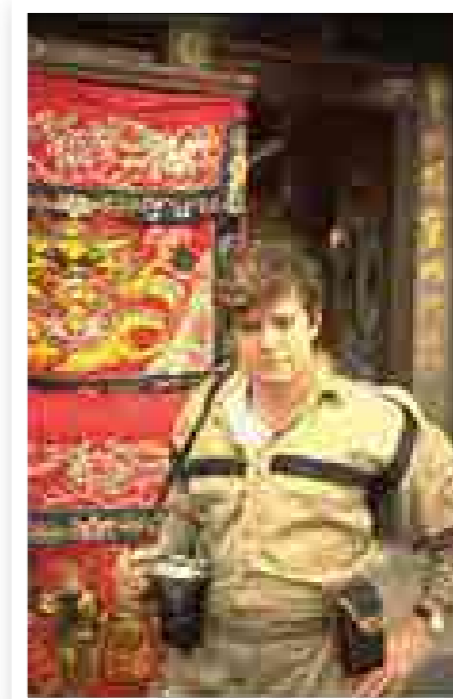
Many of Pinsler's photographs feature Taoist rituals, given his fascination for the subject. In 1978, while on a visit to the temple at the Delta Road housing estate, he saw spirit mediums (*tangki* in Hokkien) in a trance including one who had his back pierced with spears as Nezha San Tai Zi, the Third Prince (哪吒三太子), at the birthday procession of Taoist deity Guan Gong (关公). Pinsler managed to capture the unfolding scenes, allowing viewers a peek into the lives and practices of these spirit mediums.

His rich knowledge of the extensive Taoist pantheon and his ability to identify the many deities added value to his collection of photographs. Pinsler also captured trades of yesteryear such as the *samsui* women, night soil carriers, *karung guni* (rag-and-bone) men and trishaw riders.

Unlike studio photography, street photography captures spontaneous moments that are not posed, with the subject often unaware that they are being photographed. A photograph of *samsui* women on a lorry was taken from Pinsler's car while he was at a traffic stop. He said that *samsui* women were mostly too shy to have their images taken, and recalled that one in front covered her face as soon as she saw his camera.<sup>13</sup>



A spirit medium having his back pierced with spears and then went into a trance as Nezha San Tai Zi, the Third Prince (哪吒三太子), and sucking on a pacifier, 1978. The photographs were taken during the birthday procession of Taoist deity Guan Gong (关公) organised by the Delta Road temple. Ronni Pinsler Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image nos. 19990008729 - 0061 and 19990008729 - 0082).



(Left) Ronni Pinsler at the Thian Hock Keng Temple on Telok Ayer Street, 1980. Ronni Pinsler Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19990007471 - 056).

(Below) Man carrying night soil buckets along Clarke Quay, 1981. Ronni Pinsler Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19990007086 - 018).



Pinsler occasionally had to literally chase people to get a shot. In 1981, Pinsler was at a goldsmith shop in the Arab Street area for work when he spotted a night soil carrier by chance. These were people who collected human excrement (known euphemistically as "night soil") from homes in buckets for disposal at designated areas or for use as fertiliser on farms and plantations. Pinsler ran after the man to capture the shot and remembers the smell to this day.<sup>14</sup>

Pinsler's photographs provide a raw and intimate look into the sights and scenes of a Singapore that no longer exists. For his invaluable efforts to document Singapore's history through photography and for the permanent loan of these photographs to the NAS, he received the prestigious Supporter of Heritage award from the National Heritage Board in 2010.<sup>15</sup> (The NAS was then under the management of the National Heritage Board. It became an institution of the National Library Board in November 2012.)

## The Photograph Collection in Archives Online

Both the Ronni Pinsler and Studio De Luxe collections can be accessed on Archives Online, which has more than 2.3 million photographs about Singapore. These photographs were either transferred or donated to the NAS over time. One of the oldest photos is that of Captain William G. Scott, the Harbour Master Attendant and Postmaster of Singapore in 1836.

The NAS has about 600 different photograph collections. Some of these come from private collections from personalities such as Yusof Ishak, Singapore's first president, and Lim Nang Seng, the sculptor of the Merlion. There are also collections from local and foreign institutions like the Ministry of Information and the Arts (now Ministry of Digital Development and Information) and the National Archives of Australia.

Members of the public are encouraged to explore all these photographs at <https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/> and also check out what's featured on our new virtual photographs curation at <https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/throughthelens>. ♦



**(Above)** Hon Sui Sen, Singapore's minister for finance from 1970 until his death in 1983. *Studio De Luxe Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 20250000067 - 0004).*

**(Top right)** A young boy posing for a studio photo to commemorate his birthday. Portraits taken on auspicious occasions in photo studios used to be the norm. *Studio De Luxe Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 20090000119 - 0013).*

**(Right)** Wedding photos like this one showcase how bridal fashions have changed over the years. *Studio De Luxe Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 20090000116 - 0035).*



**(Left)** An old man selling dry goods, washing powder and cigarettes from his pushcart along South Boat Quay, 1982. *Ronni Pinsler Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19990007084 - 003).*

**(Below left)** A *karung guni* (or rag-and-bone) man collecting old newspapers in Serangoon Road, 1982. *Ronni Pinsler Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19990007467 - 0026).*

**(Bottom left)** Oranges sold from a pushcart at a corner of Read Street, with a coffeeshop in the background, 1982. This was an area that Ronni Pinsler frequented. *Ronni Pinsler Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19990007085 - 056).*

The writers would like to thank Teo Soh Lung, sister of the late P.S. Teo, for consenting to the use of his photographs in this article. References have also been made to the book, *P.S. Teo, Photographer (1930–2005)*.

The writers are also grateful to Ronni Pinsler for generously sharing his experiences in taking the photographs showcased in this article.



### NOTES

- 1 P.S. Teo was awarded the Associateship of the Institute of British Photographers (AIBP) for portrait photography in 1956. He became an Associate of the Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain (ARPS) in 1957, and was made a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts (FRSA) in 1958. See Teo Soh Lung, ed., *P.S. Teo, Photographer (1930–2005)* (Singapore: Word Image, 2020), 8. (From National Library Singapore, call no. R 770.92 P)
- 2 Teo, *P.S. Teo, Photographer (1930–2005)*, 10.
- 3 Teo, *P.S. Teo, Photographer (1930–2005)*, 10, 64.
- 4 Teo Yeow Seng, oral history interview by Claire Yeo, 8 June 2007, Reel/Disc 4 of 5, 20:30–20:57; Teo, *P.S. Teo, Photographer (1930–2005)*, 13, 14, 18.
- 5 Teo, *P.S. Teo, Photographer (1930–2005)*, 18–19, 22, 27.
- 6 Teo, interview, 8 June 2007, Reel/Disc 4 of 5, 07:55–08:21.
- 7 Teo, *P.S. Teo, Photographer (1930–2005)*, 7.
- 8 Teo, *P.S. Teo, Photographer (1930–2005)*, 7, 33.
- 9 "Why the Chinese Do What They Do," *Straits Times*, 24 January 1987, 1. (From NewspaperSG); Jessica Novia, "Treasure Hunters: Meet the Collectors Archiving Singapore's History," *Straits Times*, 12 August 2024, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/treasure-hunters-meet-the-collectors-archiving-singapore-s-history>.
- 10 Novia, "Treasure Hunters: Meet the Collectors Archiving Singapore's History."
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- 12 Novia, "Treasure Hunters: Meet the Collectors Archiving Singapore's History."
- 13 Ronni Pinsler, email interview, 24 February 2025.
- 14 Ronni Pinsler, email interview, 24 February 2025.
- 15 Novia, "Treasure Hunters: Meet the Collectors Archiving Singapore's History."

# A PEEK AT THE AUDIO-VISUAL ARCHIVES

## History Captured in Sound and Moving Images

The National Archives of Singapore has been safeguarding Singapore's rich audiovisual legacy for the last 30 years.

By Phang Lai Tee



A screen grab showing residents looking out of their new flat in Toa Payoh housing estate, March 1967. Image reproduced from Ministry of Culture, "Visiting New Flats," 1967, 16 mm film, 02:06. (From National Archives of Singapore, accession no. 1982000183).

As the National Library Board celebrates its 30th anniversary in 2025, another milestone quietly unfolds at the National Archives of Singapore (NAS): This year, the Audio-Visual Archives (AVA) department of the NAS also celebrates three decades of safeguarding and preserving Singapore's audiovisual heritage.

The AVA department manages an extensive collection of audiovisual documents such as films, radio and television programmes. It also preserves audio records dating to as early as 1903. These records offer a glimpse into the rich tapestry of Singapore's history, culture and heritage.

**Dr Phang Lai Tee** is a Senior Principal Archivist at the National Archives of Singapore. Since her early days recording children's radio programmes at the Radio and Television Singapore, she has nurtured a deep passion for audiovisual archiving.

### Setting up the Audio-Visual Archives Unit

Singapore's broadcasting history goes back to 1924 with the launch of radio here. This was followed by the introduction of television in 1963.<sup>1</sup> However the idea of systematically preserving Singapore's audiovisual heritage only dates to the late 1980s.

The turning point came in 1989 with the landmark report from the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts, chaired by Second Deputy Prime Minister Ong Teng Cheong.<sup>2</sup> The council's recommendation to "strengthen the national heritage collection in all media to cover sound-and-moving images" led to the setup of an AVA Unit within the NAS in April 1995. In preparation for a dedicated audiovisual preservation programme, the pioneers of the unit were sent for specialised training in Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States.

The new AVA Unit had modest beginnings. It operated with 13 staff members on project contracts: three archivists who would champion the cause of preservation, supported by 10 technical and support staff. The dedication and achievements of these pioneers over the next eight years proved significant. By 2003, what had begun as a project became a permanent division comprising 10 professional archivists, technical specialists and support personnel. With this came an annual preservation funding and the responsibility to preserve 5,000 hours of audiovisual records annually.

The transformation from a project to a permanent setup marked a crucial milestone in Singapore's archival history. It acknowledged that preserving our audiovisual heritage required not just dedicated expertise but sustained resources and long-term vision. It also reflected the government's recognition of the importance of audiovisual preservation and its commitment to protect Singapore's audiovisual heritage.

### Audiovisual Collections

Even before the NAS set up its dedicated audiovisual preservation facilities, it had already amassed some 8,000 reels of motion picture films and videotapes in various formats, each holding fragments of Singapore's past.<sup>3</sup> The film records came from a series of transfers in the 1980s and 1990s by government departments such as the Ministry of Culture, the Primary Production Department and the Mass Rapid Transit Corporation.

The videotape collection primarily comprised news programmes. In the mid-1980s, the NAS sent professional-grade videotapes to the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation to record live news broadcasts. This practice laid the foundation for what would become an extensive, multilingual news repository. In the initial years, due to the high cost of such videotapes, only English television news programmes were recorded every day. Daily vernacular news recording started almost two decades later.

Today, the Sound and Moving Image Laboratory (SMIL) of the NAS operates its own off-air recording facility. It records prime-time television news in all four official languages (English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil) and CNA broadcasts. It has also preserved radio news in the official languages till 2023. These efforts ensure the documentation of Singapore's broadcast news and multilingual media landscape.

### The First Films

The first documentary films that came under the custody of the NAS were produced by the Ministry of Culture in the 1960s.<sup>4</sup> *Berita Singapura*, a key series, was produced in a news magazine format to document Singapore's economic and sociocultural developments. They were shot in 35 mm silent film and released with voice-overs in all four official languages and two widely spoken Chinese dialects (Hokkien and Cantonese).

Each episode typically featured two to four segments, half devoted to serious informational

topics illustrating schemes undertaken by the government for the benefit of the people, and the other half on light-hearted items depicting some interesting facet of Singapore life.<sup>5</sup> This balanced approach both informed and entertained, making government policies accessible to the general public while celebrating Singapore's diversity.

These films were initially screened in local cinemas.<sup>6</sup> After Television Singapura's historic launch on 15 February 1963, they were also broadcast on television. Versions in 16 mm format were issued to the Ministry of Culture's Field Section for screening at public gathering spots such as community centres and rural villages. Copies were also made available in the film library for borrowing by schools, associations, clubs and other organisations.<sup>7</sup>

Highlights include a film titled *Visiting New Flats*, which captures a historic moment in Singapore's public housing journey.<sup>8</sup> In March 1967, residents from the Crawford and Outram areas were invited to tour their future homes

in Toa Payoh housing estate. These weekend tours were organised by the Housing and Development Board for families who were being relocated from their villages.

The series also documents a charming slice of local culture from 1963, featuring an annual bird singing competition at the now-defunct Jubilee Malay School.<sup>9</sup>



(Top) A *Berita Singapura* film was screened at the Capitol with the movie, *Mission to Del Cobre*. Image reproduced from *The Straits Times*, 5 January 1963, 4. (From NewspaperSG).

(Above) A screen grab from the annual bird singing competition at Jubilee Malay School, 1963. Image reproduced from Ministry of Culture, "Bird Singing Competition," 1963, 16 mm film, 01:30. (From National Archives of Singapore, accession no. 1982000048).



A screen grab showing residents admiring the view of Toa Payoh housing estate, March 1967. Image reproduced from Ministry of Culture, "Visiting New Flats," 1967, 16 mm film, 02:06. (From National Archives of Singapore, accession no. 1982000183).

### Radio and Television Programmes

The core of this collection lies in its extensive broadcast archives, encompassing materials from early broadcasters such as Rediffusion and the predecessor organisations of Mediacorp – Radio and Television Singapore, Singapore Broadcasting Corporation and Television Corporation of Singapore – as well as later entrants like Radio Singapore International and SPH MediaWorks.<sup>10</sup>

These records span more than seven decades of Singapore's broadcasting history and are vital records of Singapore's daily life and developments.<sup>11</sup> They offer researchers and historians a window into the nation's evolving media landscape, and gives the general public a chance to discover and relive the sounds and memories of yesteryear.

### "Mr Toilet" and the Dialect Rediffusion Archives

When Governor Franklin Gimson officially launched Rediffusion (Singapore) in 1949, few could have predicted how deeply this commercial cable radio service would weave itself into the fabric of Singapore life. While Radio Malaya, the government broadcaster, maintained its official tone, Rediffusion carved out a unique space in Singapore's cultural landscape through its vibrant Chinese dialect programming. For many Singaporeans, particularly those growing up in the 1950s to 1970s, Rediffusion was their primary source of entertainment and connection to their cultural roots, making it an integral part of Singapore's social history.

It is not well known but Singapore nearly lost all its dialect Rediffusion archives in the mid-1990s.

These were saved thanks to the efforts of Jack Sim, popularly known as "Mr Toilet", the founder of the World Toilet Organisation. Sim recalled in his oral history interview in 2012 how he came to purchase and "rescue" the Rediffusion archives from destruction.

"When Rediffusion wanted to demolish their building in Hillview Road, there is a very big building and it has a lot of archive there, so I heard about it at a party in Cai Xuan's (蔡萱) house, Cai Xuan is a Senior Producer in Mediacorp and he is my neighbour, so I say, 'Then, can I go and buy up the audio tapes?' So he introduced me to the Rediffusion guy and then he has to ask his boss and it was really quite late when he told me, 'You can have everything you want for \$2,000.'"<sup>12</sup>

The only problem was that Sim was given only a day to collect them, and once he had done so, the building would be demolished. Unfortunately, the weather was not on his side.

"I ask the two workers to collect as much as possible, and then as we are collecting, about half a lorry then the downpour came, the rain was so heavy, so we could not collect some more, so we have to go, otherwise, we would have damaged a lot of the tapes."<sup>13</sup>

Sim eventually donated over 4,700 open reels of Rediffusion broadcasts to the NAS for preservation. Some of the highlights in this collection include popular Hokkien radio plays adapted from the Chinese classic *Journey to the West* (西游记) performed by Rediffusion's Hokkien drama group and Sunday Cantonese Drama (粤语星期日剧场) by its Cantonese drama group.<sup>14</sup> Some of the performers in these early Hokkien radio plays, such as Lin Ru Ping (林茹萍), have become well-known local media personalities today.

### Through Private Lenses: Home Movies

Beyond official broadcasts and government documentaries lie a more intimate window into Singapore's past – home movies. These amateur films, shot on 8 mm, Super 8 and 16 mm film by ordinary citizens and expatriates working in Singapore, offer glimpses into the private lives of Singapore residents from the 1930s to the 1970s.

These early home movies are particularly valuable as they were made at a time when film cameras were luxury items typically owned by more affluent families and expatriates. Wedding ceremonies, birthday celebrations, family holidays in neighbouring countries as well as casual street scenes shot in Chinatown and by the Singapore River document Singapore's family lives and changing urban landscapes as seen through private eyes.<sup>15</sup>



A screen grab from a Peranakan wedding, c. 1930. Image reproduced from Tan Geok Choo (née Law) Collection, "Wedding and Family Footage of Peranakan Family, Circa 1930," 16 mm film, 06:44. (From National Archives of Singapore, accession no. 2010000429).

Minister Lee Kuan Yew's compelling 12-part Battle for Merger radio talks in English, Mandarin and Malay in 1961,<sup>18</sup> the melodious Chinese election song encouraging the public to vote in the Legislative Assembly General Election on 30 May 1959,<sup>19</sup> and the acceptance speech delivered by Minister for Foreign Affairs S. Rajaratnam on the admission of Singapore into the United Nations on 21 September 1965.<sup>20</sup> Each reel captures not just sounds, but the hopes, anxieties and determination of a young nation finding its feet.

The arrival of television in 1963 ushered in a new chapter in the media archives. Initially, broadcasters relied on 16 mm silent films, with sound recorded separately on open reels – a technical challenge that required precise and meticulous synchronisation. The National Day Rally speech delivered in English by Prime Minister Lee at the National Theatre on 16 August 1968 was one example.

For many years, Singaporeans were unable to see and hear Mr Lee's speech at the same time as the film footage captured only the moving image of Mr Lee while the sound was recorded on an open-reel audiotape. However, digitisation of the film and the audio in 2015 enabled the preservation specialist to painstakingly synchronise the digitised image with the sound. This synchronised digital video has been streamed online for public access since 2016.<sup>21</sup>

The oldest home movie preserved by the NAS is a 16 mm film titled *Wedding and Family Footage of Peranakan Family, Circa 1930* from the Tan Geok Choo (née Law) Collection.<sup>16</sup> Although the identities of the bride and groom remain unknown, this black-and-white film provides rare documentation of a Peranakan wedding and glimpses of family life during that era.

John Christianse's *Singapore 1960*, on 8 mm colour film, showcases various street scenes in Singapore. Locations such as Chinatown, the Singapore River and the Kallang Basin areas have since undergone significant transformation or given way to urban development.<sup>17</sup>

### Preservation Technology Then and Now

Three decades of dedicated acquisition and preservation efforts have transformed the NAS's audiovisual holdings into a vast repository of more than 400,000 records. The archives, acquired through various channels including transfers, donations, purchases, off-air recordings and video documentation, have grown from a rich resource of official records to include personal memories of private individuals and soundscapes. The resulting collection offers a rich mosaic of Singapore's past and present.

The evolution of audiovisual formats in the NAS mirrors Singapore's broadcasting technological developments and adoption. In the days before television, when radio ruled the airwaves, the voices of Singapore were captured on open-reel tapes – both from Radio Singapore and Rediffusion. These magnetic reels preserve crucial moments of our nation-building years in the 1950s and 1960s and were used till the early 1990s.

Among these audio treasures are recordings that shaped Singapore's political landscape: Prime



A screen grab showing the Singapore River, 1960. Image reproduced from John Christianse, *Singapore 1960 (Singapore Street Scenes)*, 1960, 8 mm film, 19:34 (From National Archives of Singapore, accession no. 2005003229).



A two-inch quadruplex tape weighing 5.5 kg per tape. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

A significant change came in 1967 when the Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore pioneered the use of two-inch quadruplex videotapes<sup>22</sup> for educational programming, marking Singapore's first steps into the video age. From 1967 to the 1980s, educational television programmes complemented classroom teaching and textbook learning.

The 1970s brought further technological advancement with the introduction of one-inch Type B and C tapes. Radio and Television Singapore readily adopted these new formats, using them for recording current affairs programmes, school debates, music programmes like *Talentine* and variety shows in the studios. The one-inch tapes were replaced by betacam tapes and DVCPro tapes in the 1990s. For every format used by the broadcasting stations, the NAS had to correspondingly invest in a wide range of obsolete replay equipment to playback, manage and preserve these analogue formats used in production and broadcast.

A new milestone was reached in December 2013 when Singapore's free-to-air television channels went fully digital.<sup>23</sup> This shift to full digital production and broadcasting marked the end of physical tape formats, ushering in an era of digital audiovisual preservation in the NAS.

### Futureproofing Our Shared History

Around the world, audiovisual archives are racing against time to digitise their magnetic tape collection. The Magnetic Tape Alert Project is an initiative that was launched in 2019 by UNESCO's Information for All Programme Working Group on Information Preservation and the International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives.<sup>24</sup> It sought to alert stakeholders and memory institutions of the imminent threat of losing access to their cultural and linguistic heritage trapped in obsolete magnetic media and the urgency to digitise them, preferably by 2025.

Memory institutions have begun digitising their magnetic tapes into digital files while the obsolete equipment that still exists to replay these tapes still works. This global shift represents not just a change in format but a fundamental transformation in how we preserve and how the public can access our collective memory.

Since the late 1990s, the AVA has digitised audio records on magnetic media, initially for improving access and later to safeguard the content from loss due to media obsolescence. In 2011, the department started the mass digitisation of at-risk audio, video and film records. These records were digitised to the highest archival standards before they become inaccessible or deteriorate irretrievably and are lost forever. These efforts ensure that the defining and unique moments in Singapore's history and the important experiences of Singaporeans through the decades as documented in sound and moving images are preserved for generations to come.

### See Us, Hear Us

The journey of accessing Singapore's audiovisual heritage reflects the technological evolution of our times. Before 2011, researchers seeking to explore our recorded past had to visit the Archives Reading Room at the NAS building, where historical footage and recordings were available only on physical media such as VHS tapes and cassettes. This physical limitation meant that our rich audiovisual heritage remained largely confined within the walls of the archives.

The start of mass digitisation efforts in 2011 marked a turning point. Over the past 14 years, the AVA department has systematically transformed these analogue treasures into digital formats, gradually expanding access while carefully navigating copyright considerations and stakeholder interests.

Behind the scenes, the work of making these materials discoverable has undergone its own revolution. In earlier days, dedicated documentation officers would meticulously watch recordings in real time, carefully noting programme titles, creation or broadcast dates, languages, and drafting the content summaries. Today, while human expertise remains crucial, speech-to-text technology assists in enriching metadata, enhancing searchability and discovery of this vast digitised collection.

#### NOTES

- 1 Chua Ai Lin, "The Story of Singapore Radio (1924–41)," *BiblioAsia* 12, no. 1 (April–June 2016): 22–27; Lau Joon-Nie, "Singapore TV: From Local to Global," *BiblioAsia*, 12, no. 1 (April–June 2016): 32–38.
- 2 Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts, *Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts* (Singapore: The Council, 1989). (From National Library Singapore, call no. RCL05 700.95957 SIN)
- 3 National Heritage Board, *Annual Report 1995/96* [Singapore: The Board, 1996], 48. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RCL05 363.690605957 SNHBAR)
- 4 Ministry of Culture, "List of Documentary Films by Ministry of Culture," 1952–1969, 16 mm films and video recordings. (From National Archives of Singapore)
- 5 *State of Singapore Annual Report 1960* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1960), 206. (From National Library Online).
- 6 "Page 4 Advertisements Column 4," *Straits Times*, 5 January 1963, 4. (From NewspaperSG)
- 7 *State of Singapore Annual Report 1960*, 206.
- 8 Ministry of Culture, "Visiting New Flats," 1967, clip 2, 16 mm film, 02:06. (From National Archives of Singapore, accession no. 1982000183)
- 9 Ministry of Culture, "Bird Singing Competition," 1963, clip 3, 16 mm film, 01:30. (From National Archives of Singapore, accession no. 1982000048)
- 10 Radio Singapore International was set up in 1994 to reach out to the region and help Singaporeans overseas keep pace with developments in Singapore. It ceased broadcasting on 31 July 2008. SPH MediaWorks was the second terrestrial television broadcaster in Singapore, established by Singapore Press Holdings in June 2000. It merged with Mediacorp on 1 January 2005.

Challenges still persist in the access of content. Despite using technology to improve search, pinpointing specific moments within recordings remains time-consuming. Often, users conducting keyword searches must still view or listen to entire recordings to locate precise segments of interest, a process that can test the patience of today's social media-savvy audiences.

Nevertheless, access to Singapore's audiovisual heritage has never been more diverse or widespread. Through Archives Online ([https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/audiovisual\\_records/](https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/audiovisual_records/)), the public can now explore a selection of historical sound recordings in "Sounds of Yesteryear (1903–1941)", an initiative launched in 2017 to trace the development of the recording industry in Singapore, and its recent sequel released in 2024 that covers the period from 1945 to 1955.<sup>25</sup>

These collections have transcended traditional boundaries, finding new audiences through platforms like Mediacorp's mewatch, where *Stories of Yesteryear*

brings these historical treasures to contemporary viewers. Even air travellers can encounter curated selections from our archives through Singapore Airlines' *Museum Showcase* series on KrisWorld.

This transformation from physical to digital access represents more than just technological progress, it reflects a fundamental shift in how we share and experience our collective memory. Machine learning and artificial intelligence (AI) are revolutionising how archives catalogue and access their collections. Besides speech-to-text technology, the AVA will continue to explore and use AI such as image recognition technology to identify faces and places in the vast video archives under its care and make them more searchable. It will pursue its objective to preserve and make Singapore's audiovisual heritage more accessible than ever before. ♦

Be enthralled by newly digitised classics, rarities and novelties from "Sounds of Yesteryear Vol. 2 (1945–1955)", the latest instalment of the initiative launched in 2017 to trace the development of the recording industry in Singapore. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



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An undated photo of Hedwig Anuar at her desk at the National Library. Hedwig Anuar Collection, National Library Singapore.

# HEDWIG ANUAR

## First Lady of the National Library

Hedwig Anuar was not only known for being the director of the National Library, she was also an activist and advocate for women's rights.

By Timothy Pwee

In 1946, an 18-year-old student by the name of Hedwig Aroozoo wrote an essay on "School Libraries" where she noted that it is "greatly to be deplored that Singapore has only one public library".<sup>1</sup>

Some two decades later, that student, now Hedwig Anuar, was in the position to do something about that deplorable fact when she became the director of the National Library of Singapore, a position she would hold for 23 years until her retirement in 1988.

In that time, Anuar, the first Malayan to head the library, oversaw an expansion of the library, first with part-time libraries and later fulltime branch libraries located in housing estates around Singapore. No meek civil servant, Anuar was an activist and a strong advocate for women's rights, and also one of the founders of the women's rights group AWARE, the Association of Women for Action and Research.

## Love for the Written Word

Hedwig Elizabeth Aroozoo was born 19 November 1928 in Johor Bahru to a Eurasian Catholic family, the second daughter of Percival Frank Aroozoo and Agnes Danker. Her father was a teacher at Outram School (1918–38) and then headmaster of Gan Eng Seng School (1938–55).

It is perhaps not surprising then that Anuar developed a love for reading at an early age. In an interview with *Straits Times* in 1985, Anuar said she could not remember a time when she could not read and started on political works in her father's extensive library at age 10 in 1939.<sup>2</sup>

Anuar studied at the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus in Johor Bahru and then at the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus in Singapore. In 1947, she entered Raffles College to read literature. Raffles College became the University of Malaya in 1949, so when she graduated in 1951, it was with a first class honours degree from the newly renamed university.

As the Japanese Occupation (1942–45) had depleted her father's savings, Anuar taught at the People's Education Association and tutored other students to get by while studying. This did not stop her from getting involved in college life: she joined the Literary Dramatic and Debating Society and was active with the students' union, becoming known as the "Lady President", a title she detested.<sup>3</sup>

Timothy Pwee is a Senior Librarian with the National Library Singapore. His interests range from Singapore's business and natural history to its daily life and religion. Having joined the library in the 1990s, he has always heard about the legendary Hedwig Anuar and is now exploring her legacy.

Anuar also became involved in politics in university. Just before the end of her honours year in January 1951, there was a wave of arrests in Singapore and Malaya for possession of Malayan Communist Party literature. Among the detainees were former Malayan Democratic Union leaders like John Eber and Devan Nair as well as several University of Malaya students including James Puthuchery.

Anuar was among the members of the students' union who visited the detainees. "Every Saturday I would apply for a pass from Special Branch to visit the detention camp on St John's Island," she said. "We would get the pass from Special Branch, and go to the Portmaster's Pier to catch the launch to St John's Island. And we bring food and books for the detainees. The British were quite liberal. They allowed the detainees to have books from the university library."<sup>4</sup>

## Life in the United Kingdom

Despite her first class honours, Anuar was not offered a post in the government's administrative service but in teaching. As a result, she decided to join the library of her alma mater, the University of Malaya, as a library assistant.<sup>5</sup>

It did not take long for her to become active in her chosen profession, joining with a colleague, Wilfred Plumbe, to overcome the objections of University Librarian Ernest Clarke to convene the Malayan Library Group in 1955. This society became the Library Association of Malaya and Singapore in 1958 where she was appointed its secretary.<sup>6</sup>

In a 1980 letter to Wee Joo Gim, president of the Library Association of Singapore, Plumbe acknowledged Anuar's role in the formation of the group. He wrote: "It was Hedwig who had the brains and the drive and the ability, even at that time, to shape the incipient profession and plan development on a national scale."<sup>7</sup> For her contributions to the library profession in Singapore and Malaysia, Anuar received the Library Association of Singapore Lifetime Contribution Award in 2007.

In 1955, Anuar was awarded a training grant and studied librarianship at North Western Polytechnic in London. When she arrived in London, she got involved with the community of Malayan students there. Most of them were already friends and acquaintances. More importantly, one of her good friends, John Eber, was the secretary of the Malayan Forum.<sup>8</sup>

The forum was started in 1948 by Tunku Abdul Razak Hussein, Goh Keng Swee and Maurice Baker. It formally became an organisation in October 1949 as a place for young Malaysians in the United



(Left) President Yusof Ishak presenting the Public Administration Medal (Gold) to National Library Director Hedwig Elizabeth Anuar at the 1969 National Day Awards investiture ceremony. Courtesy of Shirin Aroozoo.

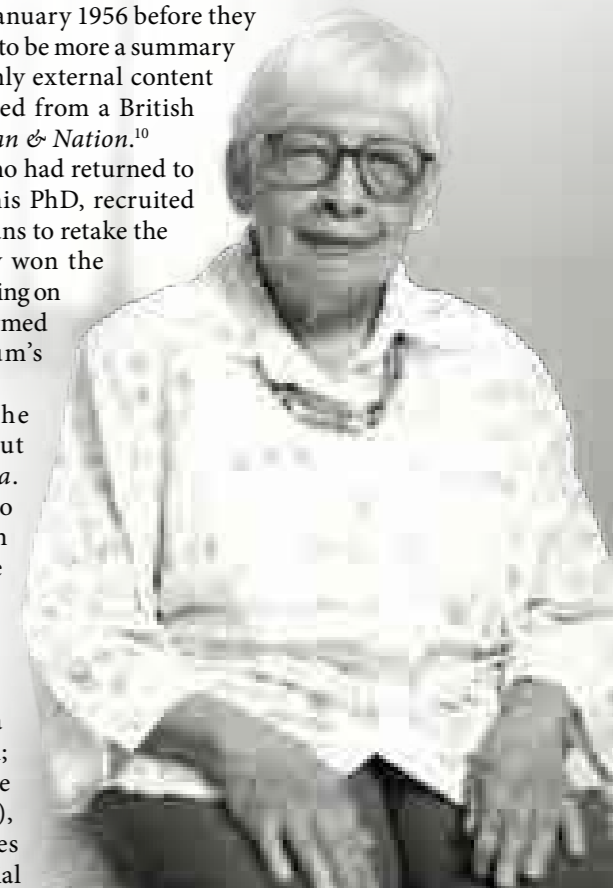
(Below) Hedwig Anuar, 2014. Courtesy of Shirin Aroozoo.

Kingdom to discuss the future of Malaya and various political possibilities.<sup>9</sup>

After they left (Tunku in 1950 and Goh in 1951), Eber's group had taken over and reduced it to being their own mouthpiece. A survey of their last issue of the forum's newsletter, *Suara Merdeka* (Voice of Freedom), in January 1956 before they were voted out showed it to be more a summary of the news, with the only external content being an article reprinted from a British paper, the *New Statesman & Nation*.<sup>10</sup>

Goh Keng Swee, who had returned to London in 1954 to do his PhD, recruited Anuar and other Malaysians to retake the forum from Eber. They won the elections in a special meeting on 12 February 1956 and formed a majority on the forum's council.

Anuar became the secretary and set about editing *Suara Merdeka*. Noticeably, there was no disruption in publication and the February issue came out with news of the takeover. It also reprinted a satirical piece, "When Malaya Ruled Britain", by S. Raja Ratnam (S. Rajaratnam; future Deputy Prime Minister of Singapore), which reversed the roles with Malaya as the colonial



Hedwig Anuar (far left) with the first women arts and science graduates of the University of Malaya, 1950. Courtesy of Shirin Aroozoo.



power over a colonised Britain.<sup>11</sup> This was quite a change in content quality from the previous issue.

While in London, Anuar met law student Anuar Zainal Abidin and they got married in 1957, after which she took on her husband's name. Upon attaining her library qualifications in the same year, she returned to Singapore to serve her bond with the University of Malaya and gave birth to her son Azmi.

### Contributions to Reading, Libraries and Archives

Anuar was sent to the University of Malaya's Kuala Lumpur campus to start a library there. However, the Raffles National Library Director, Leonard M. Harrod, retired in January 1960 just as the new National Library building on Stamford Road was being completed, leaving the library in Singapore without a director. The Singapore government urgently needed a local director for the move of the library from the old premises it shared with the Raffles Museum. Being one of the few qualified local librarians, the Singapore government requested for her to be seconded to Singapore for 14 months as the Raffles National Library's interim director.<sup>12</sup>

One of Anuar's earliest achievements was the move from the old building to the new that she organised. Known as Operation Pindah, it became a legend in the history of the National Library.<sup>13</sup> For it, Anuar even "rolled up her sleeves and physically assisted in the human chain of transporting books from one building to another, at least from director down to library attendants division for staff".<sup>14</sup>

There was no money set aside for the move, which took two weeks. "Each staff member had to carry a small bundle of books tied with a string and then pass it up the staircase of the library... There were people stationed up and down the stairs to pass the books up the staircase into the library," Anuar told the *Straits Times* in 1999.<sup>15</sup>

In 1961, when her stint as interim director ended, Anuar left for London to join her husband after being apart for four years. Unfortunately, the separation

had taken its toll and their marriage broke down. Anuar returned to Singapore alone and in the same year became assistant librarian at the University of Malaya Library in Kuala Lumpur. She gave birth to her daughter Shirin in Singapore in 1962.

In the meantime, the Singapore government arranged to contract experienced expatriate directors to take charge and develop library services for two years. Anuar was subsequently appointed Assistant Director (supernumerary) at the National Library in 1962 to the second expatriate director, Priscilla Taylor. After the latter completed her contract and left in 1964, Anuar took over as director of the National Library in 1965 and was eventually confirmed to the position in 1968.

Anuar felt it was important to ensure that the library met the needs of younger readers. For this, she recruited her sister, Eleanor Smith née Aroozoo, who had studied at Loughborough College on scholarship and qualified as a librarian in 1957. Eleanor moved from the Teachers' Training College library to head the National Library's children's section in 1960.<sup>16</sup>

In 1966, Anuar started the young people's service for the 15 to 19 age group, today known as the Young People's Collection in the public libraries, targeting teenagers aged 13 to 19.<sup>17</sup>

To make library services widely available, Harrod had opened part-time branch libraries in community centres and social welfare centres, and started preparations for a mobile library service, a library on wheels. In 1957, the purchase of a van for the mobile library service was made possible by a grant from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

In September 1960, Anuar launched the mobile library service to schools just two months before the opening of the new Stamford Road building. This service would serve rural areas by visiting schools and community centres. However, with the opening of more branch libraries around Singapore, usage of the mobile library service dropped and it eventually ceased in 1991.<sup>18</sup>

Anuar also initiated the process of building fulltime branch libraries rather than continuing to operate part-time branch libraries with limited opening

hours. Starting with Queenstown Branch Library in 1970 and Toa Payoh in 1974, this would steadily grow into a network of six such fulltime branch libraries by her retirement in 1988. The collection of vernacular language books (Malay, Tamil and Chinese) was also expanded to cater to Singapore's general population.

One of Anuar's final initiatives as director was the computerisation of the library's card catalogue, as well as the membership database and the borrowing system in the 1980s. While the initial report on computerisation was released in 1975, it was only in October 1987 that the first library was computerised – the Queenstown Library. The National Library on Stamford Road was computerised in August 1988, just before Anuar retired in November that year.<sup>19</sup> As a result, book borrowing took a matter of seconds instead of minutes. By the time Anuar retired, membership with the National Library had grown from 43,000 to over 330,000.<sup>20</sup>

Her work in developing libraries was not limited to Singapore. In 1960, the Library Association of Malaya and Singapore was split into two entities: Library Association of Singapore and Persatuan Perpustakaan Tanah Melayu (Library Association of Malaya). As one of the few respected and qualified librarians in Malaya, the Malayan government requested her services in drafting a plan for developing the public libraries in the Federation of Malaya.

Anuar accomplished this task in a year with a whirlwind tour through the states, interviewing library and government officials daily. The annex

Hedwig Anuar giving Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Defence and Member of Parliament Phua Bah Lee a tour of the mobile library bus at the Tampines Community Centre, 1979. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



of the report lists the 235 officials she spoke to and institutions she visited across Malaysia in three months (1 May to 22 July 1968).<sup>21</sup>

In recognition of her services, Anuar was awarded the Public Administration Medal (Gold) by the Singapore government in 1969.

Aside from her contributions to the National Library, Anuar was also responsible for the creation of a national archive for Singapore. Historian K.G. (Kennedy Gordon) Tregonning, Raffles Professor of History at the University of Malaya, credited Anuar with pushing for the creation of the archive as a separate unit rather than just being a department in the library. She was also instrumental in liaising with Dutch archivist Frans Rijndert Johan Verhoeven, who had been the director-general of Malaysia's National Archives from 1963 to 1966, and was appointed by UNESCO in 1967 to help set up Singapore's archive.<sup>22</sup>

A milestone was reached in August 1968 when the National Archives and Records Centre (NARC) was formed, taking over the management, custody and preservation of public archives and government records from the National Library. Anuar was appointed the first director of the NARC and held the post until 1978, while still concurrently the director of the National Library.

As with the library, Anuar led the NARC in establishing ties with regional institutions and joining the Southeast Asian Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives (SARBICA) in 1969. She was also a member of SARBICA's executive board and was its chairman from 1973 to 1975.<sup>23</sup>

Beyond the library and archives was Anuar's contribution to the formation of the National Book Development Council of Singapore (known as the Singapore Book Council today) in 1968. The council



(Left) Hedwig Anuar created the Young People's Section in 1966 to bridge the gap in reading materials between the children's and adult collections. *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*

(Below) Hedwig Anuar led the computerisation of the library's card catalogue, as well as the membership database and the borrowing system in the 1980s. *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*



After she retired, Anuar became AWARE's president from 1989 to 1991. She also took charge of the library and maintained its newspaper cutting collection, a standard feature of libraries before the advent of the internet. Margaret Thomas, another former president of AWARE, described her as playing the role of elder statesman. "Hedwig was an oasis of calm as the arguments flew back and forth... Hedwig listened as we argued, sometimes with a slightly pained expression on her face."<sup>28</sup>

For her efforts in pushing for women's rights and her involvement in women's issues, Anuar received the Woman of the Year award in 1993 from *Her World* magazine. She was inducted into the Singapore Women's Hall of Fame in 2014.<sup>29</sup>

### Professionalising Librarians

Anuar was uncompromising in her drive to develop professional librarianship locally. To this end, she pushed the development of professional associations, local training and formal education.

One of the library heads who served under her, Wong Heng, credited her with obtaining overseas scholarships for staff to gain their professional qualifications leveraging the Colombo Plan and the British Council. Wong Heng himself was a recipient of one of those scholarships. Aside from that, Anuar worked with the Library Association of Singapore to

had representatives from the Ministries of Culture and Education; higher education institutions; teachers' unions; the associations for publishers, booksellers and librarians; and the National Library. The immediate project for the council was the Festival of Books at the Victoria Memorial Hall in June 1969. This event would become the premier event of the publishing industry till the late 1990s.<sup>24</sup>

Anuar strongly felt women should be empowered, and worked towards it. At the Society for Reading and Literacy, Anuar conducted classes for older women to learn simple conversational English. The "Women Learning English", or WISH programme, took place in libraries and community centres.<sup>25</sup> "There are women who don't go anywhere except home and market. They cannot read street signs, bus and MRT stops because they are in English," she said. "They cannot make simple phone calls or fill up forms. If they can read and write in English, they can be more independent, they can move around on their own."<sup>26</sup>

### The Activist

When the graduate mothers' scheme unveiled in 1984 gave priority of school choice to the children of graduate mothers, there was much unhappiness among women. Zaibun Siraj and Vivienne Wee of the National University of Singapore organised a forum on women's issues titled "Women's Choices, Women's Lives". The speakers, all professional women, included Anuar.

This forum sparked discussions about the portrayal of women, the problems facing working mothers, discrimination against women and gender stereotypes. This led to the formation of AWARE a year later to abolish discrimination against women, promote equal rights and opportunities for women, and address questions of gender inequality. Ever the wordsmith, Anuar was the one who gave the association its name.<sup>27</sup>

start a part-time Postgraduate Diploma in Library and Information Science course in 1982.<sup>30</sup> By the time she retired in 1988, this course had produced 54 graduates from three batches.<sup>31</sup>

While Anuar did try her best to establish a local library school, it did not happen till after her retirement. In 1991, Temasek Polytechnic and the National Book Development Council started a Certificate in Library and Information Studies course for para-professionals, which has since stopped. Two years later, Nanyang Technological University started a part-time Master of Science in Information Studies.<sup>32</sup>

The life of Hedwig Anuar is closely intertwined with the postcolonial development of Singapore's libraries and literacy. She was recruited to head the development of library services at a time when Singapore was starting on its journey towards independence. But she never restricted herself to being a bureaucrat; instead, she established relationships and built networks with various people and organisations to promote reading, writing, publishing and even women's awareness in Singapore. The world-class library system in Singapore today exists thanks to the strong foundation laid by Anuar during her time as the director of the National Library. ♦



Hedwig Anuar was given a "Books of Honour" salute by library staff at her retirement dinner, 1988. *Hedwig Anuar Collection, National Library Singapore.*

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# My Mother, Hedwig Anuar

The daughter of Hedwig Anuar reveals a side to the former director of the National Library that not many people know.

By Shirin Aroozoo



Hedwig Aroozoo in London, 1950s.  
Courtesy of Shirin Aroozoo



The Aroozoo family. (From Left) Edmund (brother), Hedwig, Percival (father), Lydia (sister), Agnes (mother), Joyce (sister), Marie (sister), Kim (Marie's husband) and Eleanor (sister). Courtesy of Shirin Aroozoo.



Hedwig Aroozoo (in printed dress) with members of the first Students Union Council of the University of Malaya, 1950. Courtesy of Shirin Aroozoo.



Hedwig Aroozoo's graduation from the University of Malaya, 1951. Courtesy of Shirin Aroozoo.

**Shirin Aroozoo** is the daughter of Hedwig Anuar, who was the director of the National Library from 1965 to 1988.

**B**ooks have always been a big part of my life. I was born in 1962 and one of my earliest childhood memories is of my mother reading a bedtime story or singing a nursery rhyme to me almost every night.

As the director of the National Library, she would inevitably bring home a wide range of books for me to read. She started with picture books when I was younger, and as I grew older, she brought home books by Judy Blume and also the Nancy Drew series. Looking back, many of the books that she encouraged me to read had women as the main protagonists. I think this influenced my outlook, teaching me that women are just as capable as men and that we can achieve anything if we put our minds to it.

If my mother had to work late, I would spend time in the library browsing the shelves and checking out all the new arrivals displayed on a table. I also enjoyed my time in the children's section with the staff, who allowed me to stand behind the counter and stamp the due date on the library slips in the books. The staff were all very caring and I am still in touch with many of them to this day.

I would also attend storytelling sessions at the National Library. We sat on the floor cushions,



Hedwig Anuar with daughter Shirin, age 1, 1963. Courtesy of Shirin Aroozoo.

listening enthralled as the librarians brought the books to life. I remember participating in a fancy dress fashion show at the library where we had to dress up as book characters. I went as a Hawaiian girl, and my mother ordered a fresh flower lei and fresh flowers for my hair to go with the costume.



Hedwig Anuar with daughter Shirin, age 3, 1965. Courtesy of Shirin Aroozoo.



Hedwig Anuar at Shirin's graduation from the San Francisco State University, 1984. Courtesy of Shirin Aroozoo.



Hedwig Anuar giving Minister of State for Culture Fong Sip Chee a tour of the National Library's silver jubilee exhibition at the Central Library on Stamford Road, 1983. On the left is Lau Wai Har, chairman of the board of the National Library. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

## The Teen Years

When I was in secondary school and studying literature, my mother would spend time with me sharing her passion for poetry and Shakespeare. Her love of literature and the written word knew no boundaries. Our home was filled with books of all topics, ranging from politics, the arts and poetry to architecture, feminism, autobiographies and more. These were organised by genre so my mother could easily access what she wanted to read.

Later, when I started dating, my mother would bring home books on sex and relationships. I think, as with most Asian parents, this was a topic that was difficult to discuss so her way of educating me was

through books. After reading these books, I would then talk about these topics with my mother.

The former red-brick National Library building on Stamford Road was like a second home for us. When the building was torn down, my mother could not drive by it for many years as it was too painful. It was then that I realised how important the National Library was to her. It was a part of her and when it was demolished, it was as if a small part of her had died.

In addition to books, my mother also introduced me to the arts. We went to countless local theatre productions at the Drama Centre in Fort Canning and other various small venues because she felt that it was important to support local playwrights and theatre groups to build a Singaporean identity. She would also purchase all the local publications of fiction, poetry and plays to support the local arts scene. We also went to the ballet at the National Theatre where I was enthralled by the performances of the likes of Margot Fonteyn and Mikhail Baryshnikov when they came to Singapore.

We watched the Singapore Symphony Orchestra perform at the Singapore Conference Hall and Victoria Theatre when the orchestra was just starting up. My mother enjoyed all genres of music, including, but not limited to, jazz, baroque and world music. Movies were another favourite pastime and her preferred genres included comedy, drama and musicals. She did not like horror or science fiction though.

## A Love for Travel

My mother travelled a fair bit for work, attending conferences all over the world (where she would often be in the minority as most of the delegates were men). I heard about all the wonderful countries she travelled to, such as Papua New Guinea, New Zealand, Indonesia, Europe, the United States and Japan. She would often bring back a doll from each country that she visited as I loved collecting dolls when I was growing up.

She would also bring home books on the countries she visited so that she could share her experiences with me. Hearing about all these places as a child made it all sound so exciting and exotic to me. As a result of her travels, she had friends from all over the world and I got to meet many of them, an experience that exposed me to lots of different cultures.

After hearing about the different countries, I, too, wanted to see the world. From about the age of 8, my mother and I would travel somewhere almost every year during the school holidays. Trips ranged from a simple jaunt to Cameron Highlands or to a beach in Bali. At the age of 10, I went to the United Kingdom for the first time, accompanying my mother who had a conference to attend. (My mother left me with my aunt and cousins for a few days while the conference was taking place).

As I grew older, the idea of living abroad kept returning and I decided that I wanted to study overseas. After much negotiation with my mother, I left Singapore at the age of 17 for the United States. After becoming a mother myself, I realised how difficult it must have been for her to let me go at a relatively young age. Despite objections from concerned family and friends, I was allowed to go as my mother trusted me. I only found out much later that it was quite a financial burden on her and she had to get a personal loan from a friend to help me finance my dream of living and studying abroad. My mother's sole concern was for my happiness. She always told me: "As long as you are happy, I am happy."

My mother's parenting style was ahead of her time and very forward-thinking. It was very important to her that I learn to be independent and not have to depend on anyone. I believe this is because she was a divorced woman in the 1960s and she had to raise me single-handedly. She was extremely proud and independent as a result. Her good friend Daisy Vaithilingam told me that when my mother was about to give birth to me at the hospital, she told Daisy to go home and that

she would be fine. My mother gave birth to me alone with no family or friends around.

## A Long-Distance Relationship

I decided to migrate to Canada in 1989. Once again, my mother supported me and encouraged me to give it a go, which is how I ended up living abroad for nearly 20 years. While I was away, she would call me regularly, send me flowers on my birthday and visit almost every other year. I also came back regularly to visit her. Despite the distance apart over the years, we still managed to maintain a very close relationship through letters, visits and weekly phone calls.



Hedwig Anuar with her good friend Daisy Vaithilingam, 1950s. Courtesy of Shirin Aroozoo.



Hedwig Anuar with staff at the National Library's dinner and dance, 1993. Courtesy of Shirin Aroozoo.

When I got married in 1990, my mother was thrilled and, I think, somewhat relieved that there was now someone else to take care of me. She always said it did not matter who I married. Whether he was white, yellow, or black was irrelevant, as long as he loved and took good care of me.

In recognition of her many contributions, my mother was named Woman of the Year by *Her World* magazine in 1993. I was the first person she called when she got news of the award and I came back to surprise her at the award ceremony. In 1997, I was expecting my son and my mother visited me in Toronto in the depths of winter to witness the birth of her only grandson. She stayed for two months to help me. Throughout my life, my mother has always been around to support me whenever I needed her and likewise, I have tried to do the same.

I returned to Singapore at the end of 2003 after being away for almost two decades. I could sense that she was getting forgetful when we spoke on the phone and something just seemed amiss. It was a difficult decision but I knew that I would never forgive myself if anything happened to my mother while I was away.

### Back in Singapore

In March 2004, my mother was officially diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. She was 75 at the time. In her usual style, she borrowed and bought books on the disease to learn how to manage it. She was determined to fight it as best as she could. Fortunately, the disease progressed slowly but we had many challenging moments.

One of the hardest things to do was to make my mother give up driving. She would forget where she had parked the car and often got lost. With the cost of owning a car being quite exorbitant in Singapore, she reluctantly gave up driving. The next big hurdle was convincing my mother to get a live-in helper as she had lived alone for many years. We needed a



Hedwig Anuar with daughter Shirin (extreme right) and former staff of the National Library, 2018. Courtesy of Shirin Aroozoo.

helper for her because she was forgetting to eat, and her safety and health were becoming a concern. I was so worried when I first brought our helper home but she is wonderful and is still with us today.

The last challenge was the most emotional for me as I made the very difficult decision to sell the family home in 2021. This was a house that we had lived in for 50 years. As I drove to pass the keys to the new owners, I broke down in the car sobbing as it had been a wonderful happy home with many memories and I knew that my mother would never have wanted to move out. It was one of the most difficult decisions I have had to make since returning to Singapore.

In a 1993 interview for *Her World* magazine, my mother was asked what she feared on turning 65 and living alone. She said she feared having a disabling illness like cancer or suffering from a stroke. "I'm not worried about dying. It's how you die. Like everyone else, I would like a quick and easy death. Preferably in my sleep. That's the best way to go, isn't it? I wouldn't like a long period of suffering and pain or a crippling kind of disease. I wouldn't want to be a burden on anybody. I don't believe in being hooked up to a machine like a vegetable. I don't call that living at all. I would rather be dead. When I die, I would die happy in the sense that I have achieved so much and I have produced two wonderful children."

Today, her Alzheimer's is at an advanced stage and she needs two helpers to care for her. I am glad I have the ability to repay her for everything she has done for me, though of course a daughter can never truly repay a mother for all the sacrifices made over a lifetime.

My mother inculcated in me the value of hard work, travel, culture, family, and most of all, having an appreciation and respect for people from all walks of life. I am very blessed to have such an amazing mother who has led an incredibly full and colourful life. She has had such a profound impact on me, and on the generations of Singaporeans who have ever used the National Library. ♦



Hedwig Anuar with daughter Shirin in the garden of the family home, 2021. Courtesy of Shirin Aroozoo.

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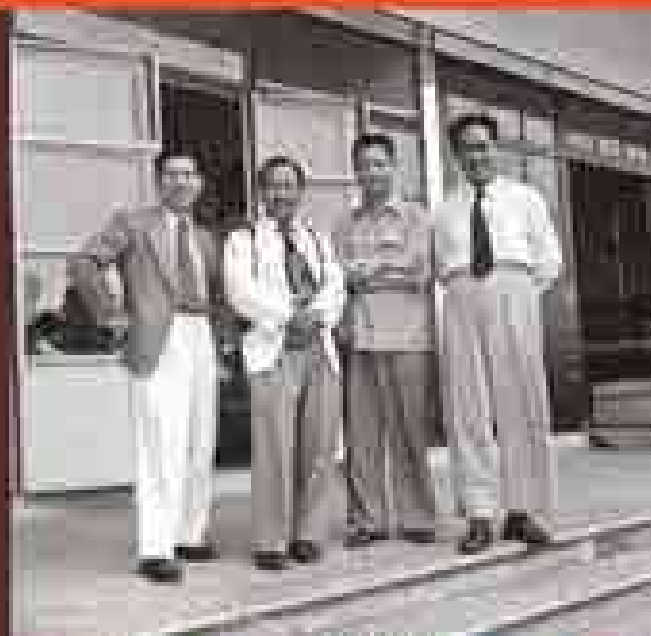
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