LIBRARY SERVICES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: AN OVERVIEW AND THE WAY FORWARD*

by

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ABSTRAK

Terdapat kepelbagaian di dalam perkembangan perkhidmatan perpustakaan di negara-negara Asia Tenggara. Kertas kerja ini memberi tumpuan kepada perkembangan perkhidmatan perpustakaan khususnya isu yang memberi kesan kepada perpustakaan awam dan perpustakaan negara. Beberapa cadangan dan tindakan serta strategi untuk pembangunan masa depan telah digariskan sebagai 'Seven Steps Forward'.

INTRODUCTION

As part of the bigger Asia Pacific community, the countries that make up Southeast Asia i.e. Indonesia, Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Burma, together form a considerable force in one of the fastest developing areas in the world today. Each of these countries, while sharing some common identities and bond, have actually in the last 20 years developed at different paces politically, economically and socially. Library developments in each of these countries have accordingly followed this same course of change in government, and have been greatly affected by their political and economic changes. Political upheavals in the Philippines, Laos and Burma, and war in Cambodia and what was then South Vietnam, followed by years of sluggish economy has not only stagnated the development of their library and information services, but also pushed back whatever had been achieved earlier. A closed door policy by Burma has left its librarians out of the mainstream of any Southeast Asian library conference, training programmes and workshops with virtually no information about that country’s library development. Cambodia and Vietnam only re-established contacts with their neighbouring countries of Southeast Asia since the 1990’s.

On the other hand, the extraordinary economic growth of the ASEAN countries at almost seven per cent over the past five years, with Malaysia in excess of eight percent for the last seven years has not only contributed to the region’s stability and security but has also resulted in rapid development of its library and information services. We therefore see today this disparity in the development of library and information services in the countries of Southeast Asia.

The focus of the discussion here is on issues that have made some impact on library development in the Southeast Asian region and the outline of various options and actions for libraries in Southeast Asia to move forward to the next century.

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The discussion is also confined to public libraries and national libraries, while academic and special libraries will be mentioned wherever relevant.

**PRIORITY FOR LIBRARY INFRASTRUCTURE AND SERVICES**

Provision of library services for most countries in Southeast Asia in the years following the end of World War II, and indeed through until around the mid 1960’s, were based mainly on what was inherited from their former colonial masters and generally unable to meet the demands that independence and nationalism placed on them. Thus library services were confined to major towns providing the more rudimentary lending and reference services. Understandably, the governments’ priority for development then was geared towards striking a balance between economic growth and reducing the social and economic imbalances between urban and rural areas in the country. Basic infrastructure such as schools, low cost houses, electricity supply, etc was, and still is, on the governments’ priority list. Fortunately for Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Indonesia, this objective of attaining a more balanced development of economic and social growth has to a great extent been achieved today. Library and information services are given higher priority, as the case in Malaysia when in 1991 libraries were changed from the portfolio of the Minister of Culture and Tourism to the Minister of Education. Education being on a higher social scale for development as compared to culture, has resulted in libraries placed on par with education, and the annual operating budget for Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia and the state libraries gradually increasing to almost 100%. Other Southeast Asian countries that are facing almost stagnant growth rates and low export earnings, quite understandably have concentrated with the here - and -now of survival. In the Philippines, public libraries and new library services are not governmental priorities, while in Malaysia provisions under the development budget for new public library buildings, mobile library services and setting up village libraries throughout the country by the Federal Government alone amounted to RM 25.9 million under the 6th Malaysia Plan, a tremendous increase from the allocation of RM 10.1 million in the previous 5th Malaysia Plan.

**LIBRARY SERVICES AND LIBRARY BUILDINGS**

Public library services are available throughout Southeast Asia, though a number of libraries and the quality of the services differ in each country. All the countries, except for Brunei, have a national library, though here again not all have progressed at the same pace. The National Library of Singapore and its public library branches as well as the university libraries have advanced ahead of others in computerised library services while libraries in Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia have made remarkable progress with on-line services to national and international databases, connecting to Internet, and the availability of databases on CD-ROM. However, libraries in the Philippines, Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia have some catching up to do, due to the country’s present financial constraints.

In Malaysia various library services have also started. Library services to the visually handicapped is now available at Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia and in the state libraries in line with the country’s Caring Society Policy. While books in braille are available, there is a need to provide talking books in Malay which Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia is spearheading with the cooperation of Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka and the sponsorship of Golden Arches Restaurants.

Improvements in library services goes hand in hand with improvements in library buildings. A new library building with better and up-to-date facilities and equipment as well as bigger floor space will not only enhance the perception of library users but enable the library to provide a variety of services. In Malaysia, we now have a new national
library building and with an increase in floor space area of three times more than the previous rented premises, Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia is able to have a new division for audio-visual services and a whole floor for its Malaysiana Collection; thus enabling us to make a tremendous improvement on our function of providing reference and referral information on Malaysia.

Singapore is planning to build a new and bigger national library while the National Library of Vietnam will be renovated soon for expansion and the facilities upgraded for its computerised services.

**LIBRARY USAGE AND READING PROMOTION**

The literacy rate of a country is a good indicator of its educational development and its reading population. While the overall literacy rate for Southeast Asia is higher compared to South Asia and West Asia, the literacy rate of its member countries differ greatly. According to the World Education Report 1993, Singapore has a literacy rate of 100%, while at the other end of the scale, Cambodia’s literacy rate is only 45.2%. The other countries have an adult literacy rate of 80% and above. Unfortunately, the majority who can read do not have a good reading habit i.e. they are not functionally literate. In Malaysia, most adults go through the day by reading the daily newspapers while serious reading and research is usually done in connection with office or academic work. Surveys conducted a few years ago by the state libraries of Terengganu and Sabah revealed that the majority of readers obtain their reading materials not from the public library, but materials borrowed from friends, second-hand book stores and book rental outlets; the main reason being that the nearest public library is too far from home. In Southeast Asia, to create a reading population, accessibility of materials is therefore very important, as well as the availability of currently published reading materials on the shelf. In Malaysia, there are too many reference books in English which are hardly used, while not enough reference books are published in the national language.

College and university libraries in Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia are much more developed than public libraries with bigger and more comprehensive collections, but again not easily accessible to the general public.

But there is hope in this seemingly depressing situation. Reading campaigns and various reading promotion activities have helped to create a greater awareness of the benefits and importance of reading, both for recreation and information. In Malaysia this has helped to increase the usage of libraries especially children 12 years and below, and young adults. The Malaysian government has just declared the month of August each year as a national Reading Month. In Singapore, year round reading promotion activities by the National Library of Singapore carried out at their public library branches and a wide range of reading materials have resulted in an almost 100% functionally literate society. Other Southeast Asian countries, faced with a bigger rural population that is non-existent in Singapore, have a more daunting task, but promotion of reading is now actively implemented in Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia with some support from the governments. In Thailand, besides libraries, reading promotion activities are also organised by the Department of Non-Formal Education through its Functional Literacy Programmes. A point to be noted is that the mass media, especially television and radio networks in Southeast Asia, which have a ready captive audience both in rural and urban areas, have not been fully utilised for the reading campaign.

**COMPUTERISATION**

As in other countries, the growth of information technology also has a profound effect on the development of library services in Southeast Asia. Automation of libraries started early in Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines. In fact the
Philippines National Bibliography was the first to be computerised in 1977, but today the Singapore National Bibliography is the first to be published in CD-ROM. Next year the Malaysian National Bibliography will be available in both printed form and CD-ROM.

Automation among libraries in Malaysia began as early as 1978 when the Malaysian MARC (MALMARC) project started. In 1988 Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia acquired a mini computer and the VTLS software for its integrated library system. The same VTLS software has also been installed at Universiti Pertanian Malaysia library, the State Library of Pahang as well as a number of government ministries and departmental libraries and special libraries. This has enabled the formation of a strong VTLS User Group in Malaysia today. The same software was also acquired by the National Library of Indonesia in 1992. In 1993, the Document Delivery Online system (Sistem Pembekalan Penerbitan - SPP Online) using E-Mail was introduced, linking 26 libraries in Malaysia who are members of the SPP group. With SPP Online, members can send request messages for loan by using a standard front end menu developed by Telekom Malaysia. Plans to have a nation-wide bibliographic library network is also underway in Malaysia in order to allow libraries using the same software and also those using different types of computer systems to access each other's online catalogue. The first phase is to allow other libraries to access Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia's databases. In January 1994, Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia launched the JARINGAN ILMU project, a nationwide library network project undertaken together with MIMOS. With JARINGAN ILMU, libraries that are connected to JARING will be able to send messages electronically to their colleagues, to access information and databases from other networks nationally and globally via Internet, thereby making Malaysian libraries a part of the global network. Singapore of course has moved far ahead of its neighbours in Southeast Asia in IT development.

It should also be noted that the CDS-ISIS software developed by UNESCO and freely distributed to libraries are popular and well used by all types of libraries in Asia. In the Philippines alone, some 131 libraries use this software. Library automation will provide a better service to library users by providing on-line access to local and international databases, pertaining to library holdings and indexing services. It will also increase productivity and improve the efficiency and performance of library staff, eliminate duplication of work and help to improve management of the information system. All libraries therefore will strive towards automation, but not all libraries in Southeast Asia have the financial resources and the basic infrastructure as well as the necessary trained personnel to start computerising. This is particularly so for libraries in Cambodia and Laos, but plans for library automation are already being considered. The National Library of Vietnam has already computerised its catalogue of Vietnamese publications and published its national bibliography using computers. Progress in library automation has been made and will continue to develop at an even faster rate towards the end of the century.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

Future direction of libraries in Southeast Asia will have to be in line with their own national policies and national objectives. In Malaysia, the major thrust for library development is outlined in the National Policy on Library and Information Services, the National Book Policy, the Five Year Malaysia Plan and the Ten Year Outline Perspective Plan. The government of Malaysia has formulated a National Development Plan which will set the pace to enable Malaysia to become a fully developed nation by the year 2020. Emphasis of the Malaysian government in terms of social development is to create a caring and an information-rich society. Thus in line with the above policies, Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia and all libraries in Malaysia have a major role to play in the development of library and information
infrastructure for Malaysia. For Singapore, the Library 2000 Review Committee Report known as Library 2000 will set the new direction for the development of library and information services in Singapore in the next decade.

While such policies will guide libraries to develop in line with their government's mission and vision statement, strategies still need to be planned in short term and long term measures, and I have summarised these strategies into the Seven Steps Forward:—

1. Reducing the imbalance of library development, first between the urban and rural areas, and second the imbalance of library facilities and services within the ten Southeast Asian countries. Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia will need to leapfrog forward and to be assisted by Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia.

2. Ensuring that all libraries in the country are provided with adequate funding for them to be properly managed, beginning with the national library. Each country should have a well established and adequately funded national library playing the leadership role in the country's library development. Contracting out services such as building and repair work and out-sourcing for funds is the answer when funds and staff are reduced. Having an effective library board committed to the library's progress will ensure adequate funds.

3. Ensuring that all libraries achieve a minimum standard of service and to be managed by professionally trained librarians to increase and upgrade their usage. Public libraries will function also as a one-stop information centre and a major learning centre for children and youth. The national library must not function also as a public library but concentrate in providing reference and referral service only. Reading campaigns and user education programmes must now involve relevant government agencies, NGO's and private sector sponsorship. Thus there will emerge in each Southeast Asian country a future generation that is well educated, computer literate, well-informed and functionally literate.

4. Establishing and developing a core special collection in every library, and in the National Library a national collection of all the country's imprints. Legal deposit laws should be effectively implemented to cover non-print materials. Subject specialisation will create centres of collection. Publishers in each country will produce more reading and research material in their own languages and script, while translations from other languages in a library's collection will create further interest in reading.

5. Providing in-service training for professional and non-professional staff with emphasis on a marketing approach to the library service. A computer training laboratory, similar to one just installed at Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia, should be available at the national or a university library and this will act as a computer training centre for the professional enhancement of library personnel, thus there will be no lack of computer-trained personnel.

6. Ensuring that all major libraries in the country are computerised. There will be available bibliographic and non-bibliographic databases accessible within the country through networks and internationally through Internet. Resource sharing can then be smoothly implemented.

7. Establishing regional groupings to serve as a forum to discuss common problems and share expertise. Today there already exists the National Libraries Group of Southeast Asia (NLG-SEA) formed two years ago in Bangkok with the specific objectives of strengthening cooperation among national libraries in Southeast Asia and implementing beneficial projects. The future will see similar groupings emerging amongst academic libraries in Southeast Asia and also subject specialisation libraries like law libraries in Southeast Asia.
CONCLUSION

We librarians in Southeast Asia have proven to be a resilient group of people, moving on even when faced with the most adverse situation. Cambodia is a classic case where the country's small number of surviving librarians have managed to reopen the national library and started services from out of the ruins and wanton destruction, with help from Vietnam, Australia and Malaysia.

The librarians of Southeast Asia must be ready to take the steps I have put forth, simultaneously if possible, if we want to move forward at a faster rate. Granted that any progress and changes will require heavy financial investment from the government and this availability of public funds will depend on the performance of the country's economy. But we must always be ready and not act only when the country's economic boom comes around. It may then be too late because by the time we are about to take off, the country's economy may be on the downturn again. We in Malaysia learned this unfortunate lesson during the seventies and early eighties.

We must know what we want and not allow ourselves to be dictated by others who seem to have made better progress; yet we must also be able to accept assistance and guidance from those who have gone through the same problems and survived. Nothing is impossible, and the future is bright for libraries in Southeast Asia who are ready to take the plunge, and I strongly believe that together we can do it.

REFERENCES