

Libraries in Southeast Asia : A Force for Social Development!

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Abstract:

This paper describes how libraries in Southeast Asia, ie Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam contribute to social development in their countries. These cover improving literacies, enhancing access to information, libraries and library resources, building communities and strengthening rootedness, and preserving and promoting the countries' cultural and documentary heritage.

Keywords: Literacies, access to information, rootedness, cultural and documentary heritage

Background

The earliest libraries in Southeast Asia (SEA) have existed for almost 1,000 years, though the ages of libraries differ from country to country. This depends on the length of the documented history of the country, and when the first documentations were found. For example, Singapore's libraries started only after the founding of modern Singapore in 1819, and its oldest library, which evolved into the National Library, had its roots in a school library, founded in 1823 by Sir Stamford Raffles. He was also the founder of modern Singapore.

One of the oldest libraries in SEA was Bagan Anawrahta Pitakataik built by King Anawrahta (AD 1044-1077) in Myanmar. This was built to store TriPitaka, the Buddhist Sacred Literature in Bagan, the capital city of the Kingdom of Pagan from the 9th to the 13th centuries. Pagan evolved into the Myanmar of today.

Together, the ten countries in SEA serve a population of 585 million people over a land area of 4.5 million sq km. SEA comprises Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

As with libraries all over the world, libraries in SEA play a significant role in the national and social development of the countries that they serve. These functions and roles are described below :

Improving literacies

As librarians, we know that citizens need to use information to help them make informed decisions in their daily lives. They need to learn to read, to find information that they need, and they need to learn to distinguish between useful and less useful information. Promoting reading and information literacy skills are what libraries in SEA strive to do for the citizens of the countries they are in. This takes many forms. The most common programme that a number of SE Asian libraries carry out regularly is a National Reading Programme that promotes reading in the country. Some of these take place over a month, and some are year-long programmes organised jointly with many partners. Below please see an image of a reading festival organised by the National Library of Vietnam.



National Library of Vietnam : Annual Reading Festival

To improve literacy, the National Library of Thailand initiated a Bangkok Home Library service, where containers that look like homes are placed in 91 different areas in Bangkok to promote the reading habit to residents of Bangkok.

The Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka Brunei organises an annual Reading Empowerment Programme reaffirming a call by His Majesty the Sultan and Yang Dipertuan of Negara Brunei Darussalam to enhance the reading habit. Besides that they also organise an annual International Book Fair. Dewan Bahasa, runs the Taman Batuturan Bergerak a performing group that travels round villages and conducts storytelling and a musical children's theatre to amuse children and to instill the reading habit. It also runs the annual National Storytelling Competition :



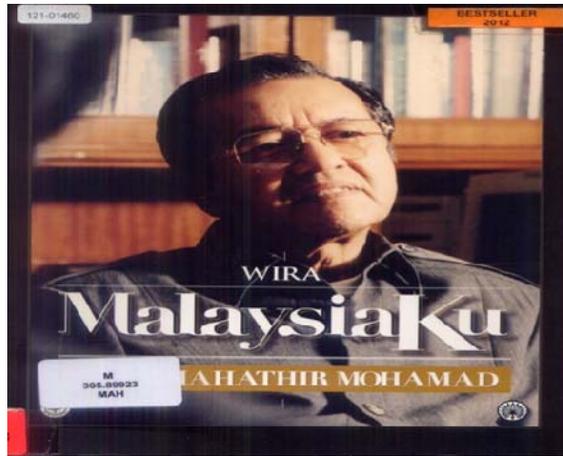
Brunei Darussalam: Annual Storytelling competition

In schools in Brunei Darussalam, students read every morning during registration and sometimes for the first 10 minutes of class. Children from the same year get to swap books around as well. The Read Book Swap is an open group started by volunteer youths. This year a Free Library in a busy shopping Mall was opened.

Libraries in Indonesia and Philippines run regular reading programmes. The National Library of Indonesia developed a reading culture platform which can be used by different types of libraries to promote reading. Please see an image of a programme held :



A number of them, for example, Cambodia, Laos and Malaysia also publish materials for distribution to support literacy programmes. Cambodia and Laos provide books for schools, while the National Library of Malaysia publishes audio books and Braille materials for the visually disadvantaged.



Audio book published by the National Library of Malaysia

In Thailand, a programme called “Bangkok Read for Life” promotes reading actively, while in Singapore, a National Information Literacy Programme received strong funding support from the Singapore government, enabling the librarians to embed information literacy skills into the school textbooks. Below please see an image of the programme :



Enabling easy access to information and information technology

For citizens who can read and who value information, it is important that they can visit a library and get the desired information in a convenient manner. Libraries in SEA provide easy and convenient access to materials that they hold, and they do this in a variety of ways. Together, SEA libraries provide a large number of library service points, though the form of provision varies depending on the geographical situation in the country. Malaysia has a total of 12,831 libraries and in Vietnam, 28,718 library service points are available for users to enjoy. In urban Singapore, public libraries are distributed based on population centres as most of its citizens live in government apartment spread over some 28 housing estates. As a result of the way the population is distributed, it is not as

challenging for Singapore libraries to reach its residents, compared to say Indonesia and Philippines where the population is spread over very large land areas, and many of the residents live in places separated by rivers and seas.

In Indonesia, a total of 79,182 library service points are provided for access to library materials, and these include 160 libraries in the island or border regions, and 50 libraries in coastal regions which are hard to reach. One of these beautiful libraries is shown below :



A few countries do not have sufficient budgets from the government to support them in their endeavour, and they depend on Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) to help them set up and run libraries. For example, Laos set up 280 libraries and reading rooms, supported by NGOs. Many of the collections are also donated by NGOs. Plans have been made to set up 50 school libraries, again supported by NGOs in the country.



Myanmar : Book corner at bus stop

As reported by Cambodia, although there are a large number of school libraries in the country, most of them are not well-developed nor well-resourced, hence they are not able to provide a good level of library services. Partners that support libraries include the embassies in Cambodia.

To improve access to library materials to residents, most of the libraries digitise their heritage materials and make them accessible remotely through their digital library services. The National Library of Malaysia initiated their Ubiquitous Library Portal with an aim to put a library in every home. After launching this service in March 2011, over 326,000 residents joined the service as members to gain access to the digital materials from outside the library. This is a definite boost to improving access to users living in rural areas.

The National Library of Philippines provides a Phil-eLib service, providing digital access to its rich digital resources through the system of public libraries in the country. More personal computers have been provided to improve access in these libraries. Please see an example below:



The National Library of Indonesia (NLI) subscribes to e-journal and e-books for the public and enables easy access to these materials all over the country. To support libraries in Indonesia to provide better digital library service, the NLI also developed 25 website templates for libraries to use to provide services outside libraries.

In 2008, Brunei Darussalam launched its digital library flagship project named VILIS Brunei which comprises four components i.e. the provision of access to e-resources and databases, automated library systems, digitisation of academic resources and national heritage information, newspapers and journals, and video streaming facilities to the academic and educational institutions. As a result school libraries are getting more online resources and technological upgrades to complement their existing collection of books. Other e-library initiatives have been launched at the libraries of Institut Teknologi Brunei, Brunei Museum, and Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka Brunei.

Building communities and deepening rootedness

Libraries all over the world have always played an important social role in bringing people from all walks of life into one common space. In an increasing commercialised world, many places in many countries are no longer providing free services to its citizens. Libraries have always been firm in protecting the right of citizens to visit any library physically or digitally free of charge. This should and must remain a key policy.

With globalisation, many libraries find themselves in a unique position to help old and new citizens or residents meet and know each other a little more. This is a valuable contribution to the social fabric of any nation. Without libraries, there will be one place less where residents from all social,

economic and geographical backgrounds meet and get to know each other in a neutral and non-threatening environment.

The national and public libraries in SEA play this unique role as well. They continue to serve as places for residents to meet and learn in a conducive manner, regardless of race, religion, social status and beliefs. Below an example of a library activity in Laos :



Libraries are also places where users can have access to internet and other digital resources without paying for them. They provide a level playing field to bridge the digital divide. Through the digital platforms, residents can also connect to each other digitally and build bonds.

Public library services in Brunei Darussalam are provided through community and branch libraries, mobile service points, bulk loans, reading corners and family libraries by the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka Brunei.



Family library in Brunei Darussalam

In Singapore, the government funded a project called the Singapore Memory Project. This aims to collect the personal memories of residents of Singapore and together with the documented history of Singapore, will give Singaporeans a more rounded sense of Singapore's social history.

Libraries can also be rallying points for the community to get together to do something meaningful for the community. The example of library@Chinatown in Singapore is a good example of how when a public agency, a private agency, an NGO and the people sector got together, they could do wonders. The National Library Board of Singapore was fortunate to receive funding from two sources, one was a real estate company and the other a temple, and they donated funds to develop, set up the library and

to run it for 5+5 years. Volunteers from the community signed up to work at the library on shifts, and this library has been providing its services to the general public using this model for some months now. It is a living example of how when the public, private and people sectors come together, they can achieve new possibilities.



Singapore : library@Chinatown, manned by volunteers on most days

By opening libraries to everyone who lives in the country, libraries in SEA play a critical role in allowing bonding of citizens and residents in the nations. This is one of the most important intangible benefits of libraries which sometimes may be overlooked by both politicians and citizens.

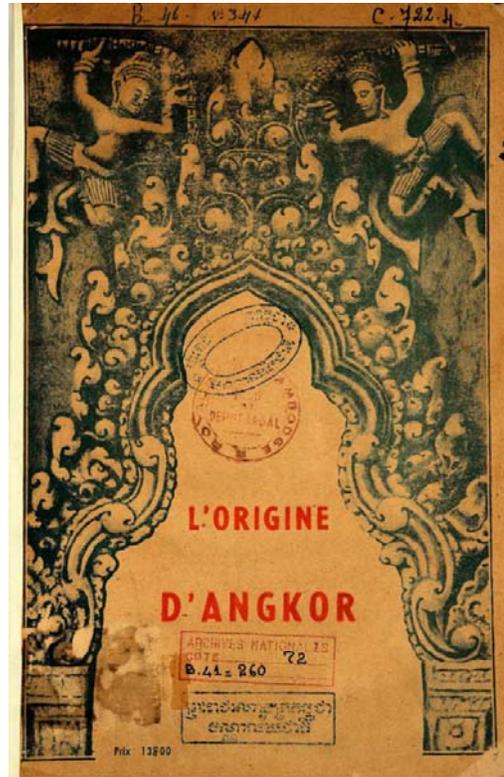


Vietnam: Internet Festival 2011

Preserving and promoting cultural heritage

Libraries in SEA play a visible role in preserving and promoting their cultural heritage. Most of these libraries have valuable palm leaf, manuscripts and rare books that contain documentation of the nation's history, the stories that made the nation.

The Brunei Museum Library has an excellent collection of books on early Borneo, old photographs, manuscripts, oral history and antique maps while the Universiti Brunei Darussalam has 1182 rare books and 239 manuscripts. The NL of Cambodia has a rich collection of palm leaf and manuscript collection, and Khmer Rare Books. Below please see an example of one of the library's treasures :

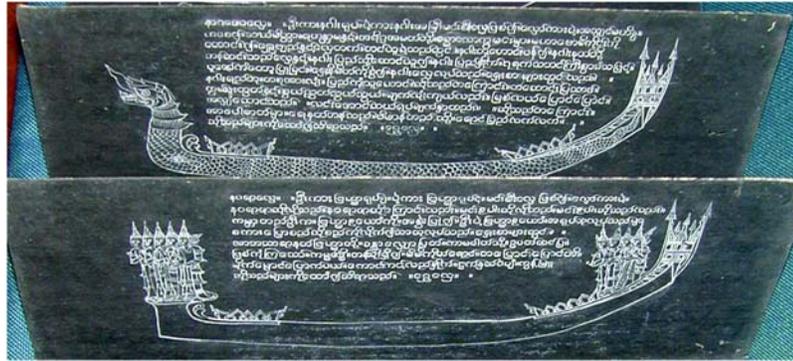


The NL Indonesia has initiated a web archiving project, ensuring that valuable heritage materials in the web space is also captured and preserved. It has also set up a National Digital Heritage Depository with over 14,000 digital objects to promote heritage awareness.

At the NL of Laos, over 12,000 manuscripts have been digitised for access, and the library has also launched a Digital Library of Laos Manuscripts.

Like the rest of the SEA nations, the NL Malaysia has a long history of collecting and preserving their literary heritage. Over the years, they have collected 2,605 rare books, 41,493 items from donors, 4,627 Malay manuscripts, and the Hikayat Hang Tuah which is listed in the UNESCO Memory of the World Registry. They have also digitised over 1.125 million pages of heritage materials for public access.

In the NL of Myanmar, a collection of 17,511 palm leaf and manuscript collection, and 6,434 rare books have been preserved for the country, and digitisation of these materials started in 2010. With digitisation, access to the materials will be made that much easier.



Myanmar : rare parabeik (folded paper book)

Recently, the NL of Philippines initiated a new project to ensure that across the country, heritage materials are systematically collected and preserved. They have started the Philippine Registry of Cultural Properties and this includes all materials that are found in the different types of cultural institutions across the Philippines.

In Singapore, the NL started digitising its complete run of newspapers from 2007. To date, over 25 newspapers have been digitised, and access up to 1989 is provided from outside libraries. Apart from this, the library also initiated a project to present the history of Singapore to anyone keen to learn more about Singapore's development through its service to be called HistorySG.

The NL Thailand has digitised 102,000 images for rare books, 252,000 images for microfilms and 35,500 images for manuscripts. They are in the process of seeking funding to enhance their portal to provide better access to these materials.

The NL of Vietnam has also put in tremendous efforts to digitise its heritage materials. Since 2012, the library secured US\$1.2 million to collect, preserve, digitise and made accessible heritage content to its people.

The effort put in by SE Asian libraries to collect, preserve, promote and make accessible their rich heritage collections is admirable. This is despite the challenges faced by these libraries in securing funding for digitisation and access.

Challenges faced by SE Asian Libraries

Funding : as with most other libraries, the most critical challenge faced by SE Asian libraries is securing funding for both their operations and for development. It has not been easy for libraries in the region to persuade their government to provide more funding for new libraries, new services, for digitisation and for developing better digital access to collections. As described above, in some of the countries, significant work is done with the kind sponsorship of partners, especially the NGOs and embassies who have stepped in to help with new projects.

Keeping up with the needs of users : with the increasing use of digital platforms and mobile devices, users are demanding that libraries keep up with these new ways of delivering services. It is a challenge for libraries to keep up with the demands and needs of users, and to develop new services to meet their changing needs.

Developing new competencies of librarians: in this increasing interconnected world, librarians need new competencies to develop new digital services. The SE Asian library science educators have to enhance collaboration with neighbours in areas such LIS education and academic activities in order to internationalise and make it as a sustainable and visible profession in a complex information world.

With very tight funding, librarians also have to be equipped with soft skills such as nurturing partners and donors to secure more funding, working with partners to jointly develop new services. This will be a continuing challenge for years to come.

I wish to thank the Directors of the National Libraries of the ASEAN countries, the Presidents of the Library Associations and their staff members, who provided both the information and images in this article.