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Centres of calculation and unruly colonists: the colonial library in Singapore and its users, 1874-1900

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to show how the library management of the Raffles Library and Museum (the former name of the National Library of Singapore) positioned the library in relation to the wider colonial society of which it was a part. More widely, the aim is to explore the role of libraries within a colonial setting.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper takes the form of historical research using archival materials.

Findings – The paper finds that the Raffles Library and Museum responded to the needs of two kinds of users: the potentially wayward colonist in need of “wholesome” recreation and the scientist/scholar involved in making Singapore a regional centre for the production of colonial knowledge.

Originality/value – While knowledge-producing institutions such as botanical gardens, zoological parks, museums of natural and human history, as well as anthropological and geographical societies now feature prominently in discussions of British colonialism, the colonial library has been overlooked. This paper represents a start at bringing the colonial library into focus as an institutional node designed to sustain colonial endeavors.

Keywords Singapore, Libraries, Library users, History

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Recent studies have shown how the operation of British colonialism depended on the creation and functioning of numerous knowledge producing and disseminating institutions. Lucile Brockway has described the position of Kew as the hub of a network of botanical gardens scattered around the British Empire that served as nodal points for the transfer of plants and the knowledge of how to cultivate them to appropriate locales. She argues that the aim of these transfers was both to encourage capital accumulation and meet the security needs of the Empire (Brockway, 1979). Richard Grove notes the importance of colonial scientific societies to the diffusion of early conservationist knowledge. He also argues that botanical gardens in the colonies, and the tropical environment more generally, stimulated the development of early forms of conservationist thinking. Gardens in his view provided a controlled space that allowed the creation of new botanical knowledge while outside the rampant progress of an unchecked capitalism made human-induced environmental changes plain to see (Grove, 1995). Colonial museums have been studied by Sheets-Pyenson (1988), who notes the twin imperatives of these institutions to provide both practical knowledge useful to develop the economic life of the colonies as well as to engage in intellectual and educational work. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, exhibitions frequently included people as well as products in encyclopaedic displays of the colonial world. Corbey (1993) suggests these helped to create a narrative of progress that justified the colonial enterprise and the role of Europeans within it. According to the author they also helped to reduce anxieties associated with contact with the other and to demonstrate that the colonial rulers had a complete knowledge of their colonial domains.

Richards (1993) refers to all of these knowledge producing and disseminating institutions as the imperial archive and argues that the fantasy of total knowledge that it offered gave great hope to those in charge of the British Empire that it would withstand the forces that historically have ground to dust all other imperial ventures – a hope that was all the more quixotic given the size, geographical range, and limited manpower the

British imperialists had at their disposal.

Yet despite the recognition that knowledge institutions have been immensely important to the creation and maintenance of empires, one particular institution has remained remarkably free from scholarly examination — the colonial library[1]. This paper represents a start at bringing the colonial library into focus as an institutional node designed to sustain colonial endeavours. In it, I examine how the library management of the Raffles Library and Museum (the former name of the National Library of Singapore) positioned their library in relation to the wider colonial society of which it was a part. Specifically, I show how the library viewed itself as responding to the needs of two kinds of users in Singapore: the potentially wayward colonist in need of “wholesome” recreation and the scientist/scholar involved in making Singapore a regional centre for the production of colonial knowledge.

The Raffles Library and Museum

The Raffles Library and Museum first opened its doors on September 14, 1874. Although it was the first to receive government funding, it was not the first library in Singapore. The Singapore Free School housed a small library from 1837 onwards and in 1844 a number of prominent residents banded together to form the Singapore Library. This library was completely reliant on subscriptions for its survival and, not surprisingly, was frequently in financial difficulties. In 1874, its proprietors agreed to transfer their assets to the new Raffles Library in return for the government taking over their debt and guaranteeing lifetime memberships to its founding partners.

Responsibility on a day-to-day basis for both the library and the museum rested in the hands of the Librarian and Curator, but supervising the institution were two committees, one for the library and the other for the museum. Members of these committees were chosen directly by the Governor of the Straits Settlements. The library itself was divided into reference and lending sections. Anyone could access material from the reference section, but only members could borrow from the lending collection. How many books could be borrowed at one time depended on membership status. By paying a higher fee it was possible to obtain a first-class subscription that allowed the user to borrow two books and one periodical at a time. The other option, second-class subscription, allowed for only one book. Subscribers chose their books from a collection that amounted to 3,000 volumes in 1874 (Seet, 1983, p. 22), but which had grown to 13,103 complete works by the end of the century. The size of its collection likely made the Raffles Library one of the largest in Southeast Asia at the time.

Although the Raffles Library was described as a public library, in effect, its users comprised only a small percentage of Singapore’s population. In 1874, the library boasted only 102 members (Raffles Library and Museum, 1875, p. 1) with subscriptions reaching a peak of 349 in 1899 (Raffles Library and Museum, 1899, p. 3). This represented a miniscule proportion of the 226,842 inhabitants recorded in the 1901 census (Saw, 1969, p. 39). The price of a subscription was perhaps one reason for these small numbers. A second class subscription cost six dollars in 1874 which was a substantial investment at the time, given that even as late as 1908, Asian laborers received wages ranging between 50 cents to one dollar per day (Warren, 2003, p. 45). However, even if the price of subscription was out of reach for most, the library maintained a free reading room in which non-subscribers could request books and periodicals. Yet even this facility was not widely used. The annual report of the library tells us that in 1878, the reading room received 4,000 visitors. This appears at first glance to be a large number, but it represented only 1.7 percent of the total population of Singapore at the time. Obviously, factors other than cost are responsible here. Two of the most likely must have been race and language. While race was not officially used to debar potential users, it must have been a contributory factor in keeping the number of non-European users to a minimum. Racist attitudes in Singapore grew gradually over the course of the nineteenth century. Chinese businessmen were expelled from the Singapore Chamber of Commerce “by the third quarter of the century” and by the end of the century they were generally banned from European social gatherings as well (Trocki, 2006, p. 47). In the *Straits Times* of May 25, 1878 we find the following instructive quote:

The daily influx of native visitors to the Raffles Museum having reached an extent which almost precludes ladies from

entering it, the rule has been adopted of reserving from 10AM to 1:30PM for natives, coolies, &c., and from 2PM to 5PM for European and other respectable visitors and ladies (*Straits Times*, 1878, p.4).

That such a policy was considered necessary suggests at least an unofficial distaste for mixing the “races” albeit tinged with considerations of class as well. Perhaps more important in reducing potential users of the library was the issue of language. By far the majority of the periodicals and books purchased were written in English, a language that only a minority could read. This was despite Singapore having a substantial non-European language press and being at the time “a cultural centre of the Malayo-Muslim world in South-East Asia” (Turnbull, 1988, p. 97).

Providing recreation to the potentially wayward colonist

Given all these obstacles it is no surprise that the majority of subscribers to the library were European (Raffles Library and Museum, 1893, pp. 2-3). And if we confine ourselves to this segment of the population, the subscription numbers assume a different dimension. While far less than 1 percent of the total population (0.015 percent) subscribed to the library, the proportion of the European population subscribing stood at 5.24 percent in 1874, still small to be sure, but no longer miniscule.

The library was called to play, within the European community, an important governance role. It provided a place where “civilizing” influences could be brought to bear on colonists seen as far removed from the home land and its mores. There was a sense in the nineteenth century (and early twentieth century as well) that Englishmen and women could easily succumb to various forms of physical and moral “degeneracy” through exposure to tropical environments (Thomas and Eves, 1999, pp. 136-42; Fischer-Tine, 2005, pp. 311-12; Warwick, 1996). If Europeans were not to be corrupted by this influence they had to take suitable precautions. Livingstone (1999, p. 108) sums up this common view by noting that for many Victorians “the tropical world had its own moral economy . . . It was a world in *extremis*, a place where a heavy price would be paid for imprudence, venery and misdemeanor”. However, what made degeneracy an issue of concern to colonial governments, rather than merely a matter for individual choice and discretion, was the need to maintain the mythology of European supremacy that underpinned the legitimacy of the empire (Fischer-Tine, 2005). As Stoler argues, colonial communities, whether in Africa or Asia, were not unified. They were composed of groups with sometimes widely diverging interests, both between fellow colonists and the metropole state. This heterogeneity required mechanisms that would “overcome the economic and social disparities that would in other contexts separate and often set their members in conflict” as well as to distinguish the colonists as a group from the colonised (Stoler, 1989, p. 137). It was therefore important that mechanisms to integrate and socialise the European population of the colonies be devised. These were often sought in institutions as diverse as clubs, standards of dress (Stoler, 1989, p. 137) and in French Indochina at least, a concern over the quality of opera facilities (McClellan, 2003). In Singapore, horse racing days, amateur theatricals, yacht races, and promenading on the esplanade were some of the activities used to unify the European community (Trocki, 2006, p. 45). Together the policies that gave rise to them amounted to an “internal civilizing mission” that matched the external mission to “civilize” the native population (Fischer-Tine, 2005, p. 298).

In the case of Singapore, I would argue that the public library was created precisely to fulfil this internal mission. The potentially wayward colonist in need of correction and proper entertainment is the first image of the user in the Raffles Library. We catch a glimpse of this user at a number of places in the historical record, including one of the earliest minutes of the Library committee, where we find the following lofty statement of intent:

In conclusion, the Committee earnestly hope that the reading public of all classes will not neglect to avail themselves of this opportunity of storing their minds with the treasures of knowledge to be found in the Library, and so advancing the education of the mind far beyond what tuition can effect, while a more profitable or amusing employment could not be found for their leisure hours than the perusal of the travels and voyages of learned and enterprising men, the histories of Nations, the biographies of illustrious individuals, and the carefully selected novels which will be found in the Library” (quoted in Hanitsch, 1921, p. 547).

The rhetoric of this statement was matched by action. The benefits of the library were to be extended to as many as possible, given the available finances. There was, for example, great concern over opening the library in the evening in order to make it possible for those working during the day to take advantage of its services. Committee members “were strongly impressed with the desirability of opening the Library at night” (Library Sub-committee, 1877a) in order “to give those whose employment precluded them from using the Library, an opportunity of doing so” (Library Sub-committee, 1876). Not only was this policy put into effect, it was continued, despite a low turnout ranging from a high of 27 visitors per night in 1878 to a low of three in 1892, for the next 16 years (Raffles Library and Museum, 1878, p. 1, 1892, p. 2). The library only ceased its evening operations in 1893 (Raffles Library and Museum, 1893, p. 3). Similarly, it was the desire of library management, rather than any strong external force, that made allowance for out-station borrowers in places such as Sarawak, Sabah, Johore, and the other Straits Settlements (Malacca and Penang). And again, this policy stood for years, despite the lack of patronage (in this case likely due to the cost of shipping). In the case of the Straits Settlements, this could be seen as a politically expedient move, given the extent of government funding of the Raffles Library and the general resentment of the dominant role of Singapore in the affairs of the colony (the Straits Settlements included Penang and Malacca, as well as Singapore under a single jurisdiction), but the inclusion of Sarawak and other colonies, suggests that there was also an urge to extend library services to the borderlands where the influences of “civilization” were most diluted.

There was also the issue of fiction. In the UK of the same time, the place of fiction in the public library was hotly contested. Some argued that there was no good reason for fiction in places of study and self-improvement. Others countered that a certain class of fiction acted as wholesome recreation that was solely needed in the industrialised world (Black, 1996). The managers of the Raffles Library were firmly in the second camp with the secretary of the Library committee noting at one point that almost one half of the expenditure on books was devoted to novels (Raffles Library and Museum, 1896, p. 2). But the novels selected had to be of merit in the eyes of the committee, “the best books of this class” in the words of the annual report for 1881. In order to meet this requirement, most meetings of the Library committee included debate about which books should be ordered. Unfortunately, a verbatim transcription of the debates was not made, but we can get an idea of the kind of novel that was not tolerated through a fortunately preserved minute recording the decision not to include in the collection W.H Mallock’s novel *A Romance of the 19th Century* (Raffles Library and Museum Committee, 1882). The notion that in Singapore the library’s mission included the provision of fiction to meet the proper recreational needs of the colonists is also evident when we consider the concern over collection completeness and timeliness of deliveries that was periodically exhibited (Library Sub-committee, 1877b; Raffles Library and Museum, 1885, p. 2). And finally, if we think about the comparatively lax treatment of offenders to the moral code of the library (with the exception of overdue books, which cases were prosecuted to the full extent of the law), we can also sense the importance the library management attached to attracting all of the colony’s residents, good and bad. Consider the case of Colonel Burton who one evening threw his used match on the wooden floor of the library. Responding to this serious breach of fire safety, the committee merely issued a letter to: “call [his] attention to the danger of this irregularity to ensure that it will not be repeated” (Raffles Library and Museum Committee, 1891a). Similarly, at one point, when subscribers began complaining about “the disreputable appearance of certain visitors to the library” the action taken was not to tighten rules of behaviour or dress, but to create a separate reading room for non-subscribers (Raffles Library and Museum Committee, 1879). The idea that the library was for all residents of Singapore, or at least all Europeans or Eurasians, was firmly entrenched.

Serving the scientist/scholar in a regional centre of calculation

That the Raffles Library was to serve as a place for instruction and proper recreation for the island’s colonists was its first role, but not the only one. In the following paragraphs I argue that the library also acted as a centre of calculation, to use Bruno Latour’s term, for the South East Asian region as a whole.

Latour developed the centre of calculation concept in order to understand the nature of the scientific process. He argued that science is, like politics or war, a process of amassing more and better allies than one’s adversary. Key to this process are the various paper inscriptions (maps, computer printouts, graphs and charts) that allow the scientist to confront non-believers with easily mobilised evidence. It is impossible, for example, to show a

sceptic actual sub-atomic particles, but, Latour argues, you can show graphs, photos, and equations that demonstrate their existence. Inscriptions act effectively as allies because they can be easily assembled in the immediate area of the scientist and his or her doubters. At the same time their content, if not meaning, is fixed; it does not perish, at least over the medium term. For these reasons Latour also refers to inscriptions as immutable mobiles. By collecting these numerous immutable mobiles in one place it is possible for an individual or small group to dominate much larger or more complex entities. In this regard, he notes that “the same medical mind will generate totally different knowledge if applied to the bellies, fevers, throats, and skins of a few successive patients, or if applied to well-kept records of hundreds of written bellies, fevers, throats, and skins, all coded the same way and all synoptically present” to the one observer (Latour, 1990, p. 37). But there is a catch here, in that great numbers of “immutable mobiles” collected in one place can overwhelm the best of human minds. There is a need to reduce these first-order inscriptions to a more manageable number. Here, Latour evokes the image of a cascade of inscriptions, each simplifying its predecessor by successive aggregation. The mountain of census questionnaires filled in by individuals are reduced to a hill of tallies, which is further reduced to a single paper with totals, in a process that generates new, but easier to take-in-at-a-glance, inscriptions which can be easily deployed in arguments. This work of collecting immutable mobiles and simplifying them takes place in what Latour refers to as “centers of calculation” which include institutions such as museums, botanical gardens, labs, and census bureaus. Libraries are also key centres of calculation as they contain vast numbers of cascaded inscriptions within the covers of their books and journals.

In the nineteenth century the major centres of calculation were mostly located in Europe and the USA, but there were also regional centres. Hevia (1998, p. 243) tells us that the British used several locally based institutions to generate appropriate inscriptions about China to pass on to larger organisations based in the UK:

[. . .] the [British] legation . . . collected data and generated reports on the Qing government’s ability to adapt itself to the “norms” of international relations. The Imperial Maritime Customs decoded Chinese weights, measures, and currencies, and generated statistics on Euro-American trade through the treaty ports. The Royal Asiatic Society organised a library of old and new works on China, published empirical research in its journal, and acted as a meeting site for merchants, missionaries and diplomats operating in China.

Singapore may also be seen as a regional centre of calculation for British Southeast Asia and it is my argument that the Raffles Library in Singapore was, alongside such other institutions as the Botanical Gardens, the Straits Philosophical Society, and the Raffles Museum, a part of this apparatus. The second image of the library user was therefore that of a scholar/scientist.

The Raffles Library gradually moved from its position as a public library primarily concerned with the recreational needs of the colony to one that also supported Singapore as a regional centre of calculation. Of course, there was some effort from the start to cater to scientific pursuits. The Superintendent of the Public Gardens was allowed to remove any number of botanical works from the library for a period of three weeks or until a subscriber requested one of the works (Raffles Library and Museum Committee, 1881) and the Straits Asiatic Society, concerned with the scientific study of Malaya, was allowed to receive correspondence at the library’s address (*Straits Times Supplement*, 1877a, b). Furthermore, the Logan collection of books was purchased for the library in 1878. This collection, part of the library of JR Logan, an eminent scholar resident in Penang and editor of one the earliest scientific journals in the region, the *Journal of the Eastern Archipelago*, consisted of a large number of philological works related to the Malay world. It was offered for sale to the library by Logan’s son and eventually purchased for £520, half of which was provided by the Straits government. However, the acquisition of the Logan library is also a sign of the hesitancy of the library management of the time to embrace the scholarly user of the library as the minutes tell us that this was not a unanimous decision. Instead, two committee members put forth an amendment to the original proposal to take charge of the books that recognised the interest of the collection, but noted that they felt “great hesitation in recommending its purchase by Government at the price named; as after a careful examination of the catalogue they cannot find that the usefulness of the books in Singapore would be at all commensurate with the money spent” (Raffles Library and Museum Committee, 1878). Although defeated, the amendment clearly suggests that the notion

of a library for the use of scholars in Singapore was not yet universally accepted in the 1870s.

Over the following two decades, however, the position of science and scholarship in the library changed dramatically. The library became a supporter of the Hakluyt Society in 1883 with the committee agreeing to purchase all its publications not currently owned (Raffles Library and Museum Committee, 1884). Gaps in the collection of scientific and scholarly works on Malaya were rectified in 1891 when the committee voted to give two of its members £100 to purchase books at their own discretion (Raffles Library and Museum Committee, 1891b). It is also possible to gauge a rising interest in the scientific or scholarly user in the library through the library's changing collection of periodicals. Eight of the annual reports written between 1877 and 1901 contain lists of the periodicals and newspapers that the library subscribed to and these provide an indication of the changing collection policy of the institution (see Figure 1). The two largest categories of periodicals were literary magazines (for example, *Blackwoods*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and *Chamber's Journal*) and scientific journals (for example, *Geographical Magazine*, *Journal of the Linnean Society* and *Nature*).

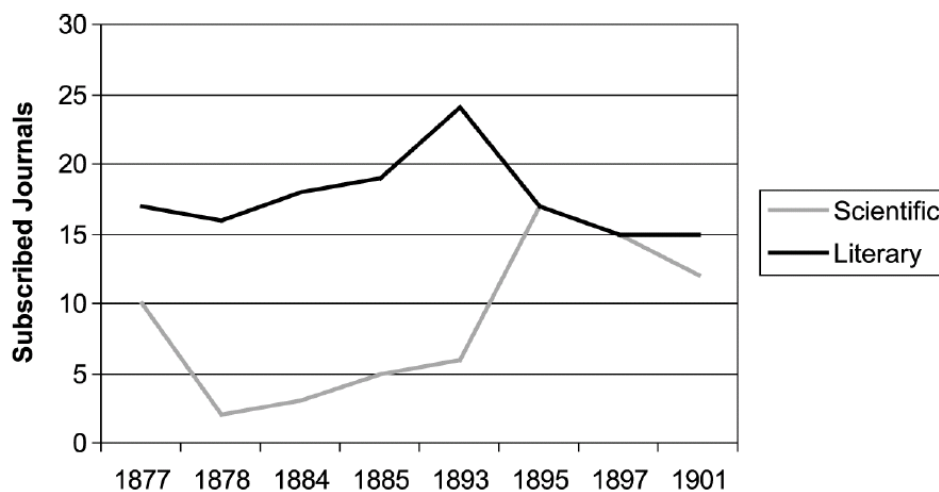


Figure 1.

In 1877 17 literary magazines were taken in as opposed to ten scientific periodicals. However, the next year, likely reflecting the desires of the government's newly appointed library management committee, saw a drastic decline in science journals with only two remaining in the collection (*Gardener's Chronicle and Nature*). At the same time, the decline in the number of literary journals was insignificant, with only one title dropped. Clearly the emphasis at this time was on providing for the perceived recreational needs of the colonists, rather than those of scholars and scientists. At the end of the period in question, however, this imbalance had been remedied. In 1901 12 science journals were in the collection, only three less than the literary magazines.

While we must rely on the minutes and collection policy of the library to determine the overall attitude of the library's management committee, the chief librarians themselves were more vocal about the need of the library to accommodate professional users. In 1883, Haviland expressed his opinion that the library be reorganised into what he called a "Government Library" so as to better facilitate speedy access to information. Currently the library allowed subscribers to borrow books and periodicals creating a situation where "a single individual, by paying a few dollars a year, and by early application, can take away the more important books on the subject, and make them wholly inaccessible for the time to all others" (Raffles Library and Museum, 1893, p. 3). In his eyes, it would be better to make the entire library non-circulating. This would undoubtedly benefit those whose profession it was to conduct research, but make access more difficult for people not in that line of work. In the same report Haviland further signalled his preference for professional users when he declared "that the narrower interests of Singapore residents, centred in the Lending Library, are in great part antagonistic to the broader Rafflesian interests of a Public Museum and Library for the benefit of all who make use of Singapore as a commercial centre" (Raffles Library and Museum, 1893, p. 1).

Haviland's successor, Richard Hanitsch also voiced a preference for a library focused on science and

scholarship over one catering to broader recreational needs in a comment made three years later when he noted with satisfaction the growing use of the library by “scientific men passing through Singapore” (Raffles Library and Museum, 1896, p. 3). Thus it is not surprising that when the library of Reinhold Rost, the former Librarian to the India Office, became available for purchase in 1897, there was no mention in the minutes of any dispute over the acquisition of this philological and scientific collection. The man of science was by the end of the century firmly established in the minds of management as the second user of the Raffles Library.

Conclusion

This article has shown how the management of the Raffles Library had over the course of the last quarter of the nineteenth century two ideal users of the library in mind when formulating policies. The first was that of the potentially wayward colonist. For this user, the library was to provide “good” recreation. The second was the scientist or scholar engaged in the process of creating new immutable mobiles at a regional level. Although the emphasis given to each of these users varied over time, both allowed the library to deal with issues of outstanding concern to colonialism. In the first case, the library addressed the sometimes contradictory and also complicated relationship between colonists who did not necessarily share similar class or social backgrounds. This had to be done, in the eyes of colonial officials at any rate, in order to maintain a distinction between the ruling race and those it ruled. In the second case, it contributed to one of the basic operations of colonialism, creating the knowledge that gave colonialists the edge needed to maintain and expand their empire. The library shared these two functions with many of the other knowledge-producing institutions of the time. Exhibitions of colonial peoples not only allowed anthropologists access to new “specimens” but taught the public their own place in the colonial order. Colonial museum “curators brought a missionary zeal to their work, an enthusiasm which implied . . . a concern with extending the frontiers of civilization” and well as building up collections of use to scholars (Sheets-Pyenson, 1988). Scholarly societies such as the Royal Geographic Society, sponsored the scientific surveying of areas previously unknown to Europeans with a concern to making the results of these endeavours more widely known to the public (Jones, 2005). All of these institutions, including the colonial library, worked to hold together an Empire that, as Richards (1993) reminds us, was as fragmentary and incoherent as it was geographically vast.

Note

1. There are some exceptions, especially for the continent of Africa. See, for example, Olden (1995), Sturges and Neill (1998) and Amadi (1981). Richards (1993) discusses the role of the British Museum library as a hub of the British Empire’s knowledge network, but does not discuss in any great detail specific colonial libraries.

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