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The social role of the Raffles Library, Singapore, in the inter-war years

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this article is to examine the inter-war history of the Raffles Library in Singapore with the aim of understanding what the management of the library believed its role should be as well as the role others in that society considered that it should fulfill.

Design/methodology/approach – The article is based on historical research using archival sources.

Findings – To a great extent the management of the library narrowly construed the institution's mission in terms of appealing to that class of persons likely to become paying members – that is, the European elite and its high-level local collaborators. Financial constraints, relations between the library and museum as well as prevalent negative attitudes regarding class and race in colonial society are likely reasons for the lack of sustained attention to non-European populations.

Originality/value – The library history of much of Asia remains relatively unexplored, especially from a viewpoint that stresses the importance of social context to library structure and operation.

Keywords Singapore, Raffles Library, British Malaya, Colonial libraries, Library history, Libraries

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Writing of the origins of the public library in the USA, Jesse Shera concluded that “Judged by every standard and measured by every criterion, the public library is revealed as a social agency, dependent upon the objectives of society. It followed – it did not create – social change” (Shera, 1949, p. 248). The same can be said of libraries in the rest of the world, certainly of those in Singapore, among which the largest was the Raffles Library. Prior to the First World War Raffles Library played roles as a reference library for scholars working in the region and as an institution where European officials, businessmen and their families could engage in recreational reading (Luyt, 2008, 2009). A changed economic and social environment after the war made new demands. This article will, using the newspaper record of the time and available documentary material from the library itself, examine these demands, which, as Sterling (2008) has also argued in the case of other colonial libraries, amounted to making the library a mechanism to socialize the non-European clerks and junior administrators upon which the smooth functioning of the colonies increasingly depended. This article will also outline the role that library management saw itself playing. To a great extent this role was narrowly construed in terms of appealing to that class of persons likely to become paying members – that is, the European elite and its high-level local collaborators. It was concerned to maintain the “attractiveness” of the library as a place and to provide recreation to those same individuals. Educating

aspiring officials in the norms of the middle class through provision of adult education was not a priority for library management until the very end of the period under consideration. The one exception was the Junior Library, which was at least partially concerned to “incubate” loyal library subscribers for the future. We can explain the library management’s reluctance to engage more with Singapore’s local population and public opinion as shaped by the English-language press of the time as a matter of finance – they just did not have enough money to embark seriously on more inclusive library projects. But relations between museum and library as well as prevalent and negative attitudes regarding class and race among the European population at the time were also likely contributing factors. It was not until the revolutionary years immediately following the end of the Second World War that the Raffles Library articulated a new and more inclusive library policy.

Demanding change at the library?

It would be a mistake to believe that there was an outpouring of support for the notion that the Raffles Library should cater to a wider segment of the colony’s population in the pages of the major English-language newspapers during the inter-war years. But, compared to the pre-war period where there was no mention at all of such a role for the library, the number of articles, small as it is, is still noteworthy.

The first we hear of adult education is from an article covering the opening of the Raffles Junior Library in July 1923. In this article, James Johnson, the librarian, was at pains to note that the Junior “library is not intended for the senior pupils of our schools only [...] Those who have just left the good influence of the school behind may join the library and so continue their studies” (*Straits Times*, 1923). Johnson was a professionally trained librarian, so it is not so surprising that he was an early advocate of an adult education role for his library. But his was a voice in the wilderness for many years. It is only in 1935 that we hear of the notion again. Ironically, this time the Raffles Library, without much evidence, is held up as an example for the rest of British Malaya to follow. The article claimed “anybody who has walked the wonderful maze of bookshelves in Raffles Library at Singapore will realize what a public library can be to the thousands of lads leaving our schools today. Such institutions if established in Ipoh and Taiping [two major towns in mainline British Malaya] could be made to serve people throughout the State in the same way as Raffles Library serves enrolled members” (*Straits Times*, 1935b). What the article failed to note was that the Raffles Library in 1935 had only 1,662 subscribers in a city of close to 600,000 people and of those subscribers two-thirds were Europeans (Raffles Library and Museum, 1935, pp. 11-12). Perhaps by the standards of the rest of British Malaya, Raffles Library was an exemplar, but it could certainly not be seen as on the forefront of progressive change. One article and two letters to the editor appearing towards the end of the 1930s are clear on this point, advocating as they do a stronger presence for the library in the field of adult education. The article raises the question why “Eurasian and English-educated Asiatics make so little use of Raffles Library?” The answer given is that they require someone to “start them off with a book or two”. The author turns to the newly established Kuala Lumpur Book Club to buttress his position, observing that the club “used to be a snooty little private library run exclusively for Europeans” but that now “it has broadened its outlook to some extent and now it is opening its doors [...] to government clerks”. But the club also provided subscribers with a service of

guided reading. Every month subscribers received lists of recommended books and authors and an invitation to attend a literary talk. These talks apparently “proved so popular that the Town Hall actually had to be engaged for the last one”. The possibilities for educational uplift would be, according to the author, even greater in Singapore with its better stocked Raffles Library to draw on as a resource, and he concludes that “the time has come to convince the clerk that the city library is for him as well as the Europeans” (*Straits Times*, 1939a). The anonymous author of this article received at least two letters to the editor, both of which supported the idea of a reading club as a library service. Richard Sidney, a former headmaster of the Victoria Institution, one of the oldest schools in Kuala Lumpur, argued that what was “needed [was] a great deal more ADULT EDUCATION [capitals in original] than this city now possesses, if it can be said to possess any at all. We have got to take the young men who are making their living in commercial offices [...] and convince them that because their schooldays are over this does not mean that their English reading has finished [...] Rather, we must convince them that now is their chance to profit by their schooling, to become subscribers to Raffles Library” (*Straits Times*, 1939b).

Concern for non-Europeans’ use of the library was also manifested at this time by comments on the inconvenient opening hours of the library: “The office worker finds it most convenient to borrow a book after office hours, and, if he wishes to remain in the library for some reading, he finds he has very little time to do so before the library closes” (*Straits Times*, 1939c). This was the opinion of one newspaper reader and subscriber to the library. He was echoed by one of the paper’s journalists, who wrote in 1935 that “I have never come across any other city in which the public library was closed at sundown, thus in effect making it useless to office workers, for reading and study as distinct from the mere borrowing of books [...] The value of Raffles Library, as a cultural centre would be increased by one hundred percent if it were kept open until 9PM” (*Straits Times*, 1935a). Another author writes that although the Raffles Library was “one of the finest in the Far East”, “it was unfairly closed during those hours of the day during which a man most appreciates a library” so that “the average employee in Singapore finds time hanging idly on his hands [...] as a result of which he frequently has to find his amusement in places at which ordinarily he would not gather” (*Malayan Saturday Post*, 1927). A concern for wholesome recreation for Singapore’s non-Europeans and the neglect of the Raffles Library to cater for this was also the subject of a letter to the editor signed “A Young Clerk” appearing in late 1920. The “young clerk” wrote that opening the library later in the evenings would “prove a boon to the younger generation, as, instead of wasting their time, and perhaps money also, in useless pursuits or in objectionable places they could come to this depository of knowledge to gather information” (*Singapore Free Press*, 1920).

Interest in expanding the clientele of the library was also expressed as a concern that Singapore’s non-European population be exposed to “good” books. H.R. Cheeseman, a senior official in the Department of Education, for example, declared that he compiled his bibliography and extracts of books on Malaya in order “to awaken in the youth of this country some interest in what we may call our Malayan literature” (*Straits Times*, 1933). While Cheeseman concerned himself with imparting European knowledge of Malaya, others worked to give the local population access to Western classic literature to form a habit of reading “good” books rather than “magazines and those [books] of a heretrious character relying mainly on sex appeal” that one author

found disturbing. He went on to criticize the current level of provision for children's reading, wondering "how far our secondary boys' and girls' schools are inculcating the taste for serious reading", suggesting that "a serious effort to guide and stimulate the reading of students out of school hours is likely to have far-reaching results" (*Straits Times*, 1929). The need for a better system of adult education in the colony was also the subject of a letter to the editor berating the library for raising its subscription rates. The library argued that the library "should be absolutely free" because "for good or evil the head of the Government throughout the British Empire is democratic, and in a cosmopolitan centre such as this, with 50 or 60 thousand of the younger generation speaking English, and wanting access to good literature, it is absolute folly to be spending millions of dollars upon new colleges, and at the same time denying to the people the means of education and advancement, lying at their feet" (*Straits Times*, 1920). Similarly, an article appeared in the *Singapore Free Press* in 1924 pointing out that for the local-born and non-Europeans in Singapore "reading good books [...] is a habit that has to be acquired" and that what happens to many is that after their school years "an immense amount of energy and time is spent on reading rubbish, not merely illiterate rubbish, but books absolutely harmful and destructive of morals" so that they make poor members of the community, spending their time in "idle gossip [...] grumbling at the powers that be [...] frequently taking an extreme view [...] and [becoming] a nuisance to the community, if not a positive danger". The solution for this author was encapsulated thusly: "We want more libraries, more reading societies, better selection of books and cheaper in price" (*Singapore Free Press*, 1924).

The library's response

As mentioned previously, there was no public clamor, as measured by newspaper reportage at any rate, for a broadening of access to the Raffles Library in the inter-war years, but rather the beginnings of interest in the matter. Even this low level of interest was not matched to any great extent by the management of the library. Whereas the newspapers reported on inconvenient opening hours the *Annual Report* of the Library in 1920 laconically noted that "when the financial stress is easier the idea is perhaps worthy of further investigation" (Raffles Library and Museum, 1920). Two years later, the report noted that it might be possible to open the library a few nights in the week "when finances permit" (Raffles Library and Museum, 1922). But the finances apparently remained intractable, for the problem persisted right to the end of the period we are considering, with F.N. Chasen, the Director of the Library, observing in 1939 that "I personally have not received a single request for opening the library for later hours" and that the "committee has not been convinced that there is a demand for extending library hours" (*Straits Times*, 1939d). If even this simple policy change was not affected, it would have been surprising if any else was done to make the library more accessible. And so we come to the Junior Library, established in 1923, which was indeed a surprising event. Two factors would seem to explain the creation and maintenance of the Junior Library. The first of these was the background of the librarian at the time, James Johnston. Johnston was the first professionally trained librarian at the library. Appointed in 1920, he retired in 1934 for medical reasons. It is likely that his training contributed to his zeal for public library service to children. During the opening ceremony, Johnston was expressly credited with originating the idea (*Straits Times*, 1923). But of course Johnston could do nothing alone. As well as his

own passion Johnson likely capitalized on a more pragmatic incentive to achieve his aims – the idea that the Junior Library could be an incubator for future adult subscribers. As early as 1920, Johnston had linked the Junior Library to such an aim, writing in the *Annual Report* that he hoped it would “lead them to frequent the library in later years” (Raffles Library and Museum, 1920). He was able to put together a network of supporters ranging from the colony’s teachers (at a time when few schools had libraries) to influential citizens such as A.W. Still, a respected journalist and “the oldest member of the Museum and Library Committee”, who noted in his speech at the opening of the Junior Library that it was “a design which had been very close to his heart since his arrival in the colony” (*Singapore Free Press*, 1923). But while members of the Library Committee continued to support the Junior Library after he left Singapore, the Library Director was dismissive, labeling it as “rather a hobby of ours” and arguing that it was no longer useful now that “good school libraries now exist in Singapore” (National Archives of Singapore, 1940).

Outside the Junior Library there is very little evidence that the library was interested in actively expanding non-European membership. Instead one sees concern only with making the library popular with the already existing class of subscribers. Attention was paid in the annual reports to the efforts made in making the library “attractive”. Carpets were fitted in 1922, for example. In 1923, the magazine room was noted favorably as “much used, especially by ladies” because of the attractiveness of the magazines on offer, but very few women subscribers were non-European at the time (Raffles Library and Museum, 1920). The ladies were also the focus of attention a decade later, in regard to the formation of a ladies’ reading room with “13 appropriate periodicals [...] a green baize covered table, mats, and chairs with white covers” (Raffles Library and Museum, 1932). In 1935 the librarian boasted that “the introduction of flowering pot plants on the staircase and landings seem also to have been appreciated by the regular users of the reading room” (Raffles Library and Museum, 1935, p. 14) while the *Annual Report* was quick to report in 1937 that “new brown chair covers and mats have been added to the members’ reading room and the reading tables provided with new cloths” (Raffles Library and Museum, 1937, p. 16).

The recreational use of the library was also an issue. In 1922, the librarian applauded the Library committee for helping “him keep in closer touch with the literary needs of the public” (Raffles Library and Museum, 1922). Of course, all of the members at the time were European and this did not change until 1934, with the appointment of the prominent lawyer Song Ong Siang (National Archives of Singapore, 1934). European literature was key to these perceived needs. The *Annual Report* for 1930 notes that 151 out of the 165 English bestsellers for the year were purchased for the library (Raffles Library and Museum, 1930, p. 7). Similarly inspired by the literary needs of the European community was the decision to acquire omnibus novels, which apparently were most “suitable for those leaving the colony, on a short holiday” (Raffles Library and Museum, 1933). We also get a glimpse of the real purpose of the Raffles Library in a memorandum on its management prepared by the librarian in 1929 at the request of the Committee. In the memorandum, the librarian laments the low level of education of his staff, noting that “a higher standard of education is required of clerks constantly attending Europeans in a library. Their knowledge of [European] authors and books is negligible” (Johnston, 1929). It was only at the end of the period under consideration here that we see any evidence of purposeful collecting in the

vernacular languages of the colony (principally Chinese and Malay, but also various Indian languages). This was the allocation of \$500.00 for the improvement of the Chinese section of the library. Even so, we do not know the nature of the material collected – was it scholarly or popular?

What accounts for the lack of attention to the expansion of library service to the larger public of Singapore? At least three factors are of importance in providing an explanation: a lack of finance, museum-library relations, and contemporary attitudes towards class and race.

Finance

In 1920 the colonial government provided Raffles Library with an annual grant of \$15,000. Subscriptions and other sundry sources of revenue came to a total of \$4,656.30. In contrast, salaries accounted for \$14,725.79 in expenses, and book purchases, binding, and other costs associated with the collection another \$4,836.86. It is clear that the room to fund new programs was clearly limited at this time. Neither did it much improve with time. By 1939, the government grant had risen to \$25,971 per year. But salaries continued to claim most of it (\$22,228.68). Revenue from subscriptions amounted to \$16,018, but library expenditures stood at \$10,889.04. Given the balanced nature of the institution's finances, it is not surprising that little innovative work was planned or carried out. An attempt was made to augment the meager resources of the library through an appeal to the Municipal Council to grant an annual subsidy, but nothing came of this as the commissioners declared that: "that they are unable to see their way to make any grant in this connection" (National Archives of Singapore, 1938). And while the colonial government had increased the subsidy it provided to the library, it was unlikely to be able to provide very much more, even if asked, which does not appear to be the case. The inter-war years have been described as exhibiting, in terms of colonial administration, "an air of stagnation" (Porter, 2004, p. 270). Although it was generally conceded that as trustees or custodians of subject peoples it was necessary that colonial governments around the world work towards the moral and educational progress of those same people, this was balanced by a notion that the colonies should be economically self-sufficient, especially when it came to drawing on funds from the metropole (Porter, 2004, pp. 268-9). Under such constraints major programs of social welfare, including educational development, were unlikely to succeed.

Museum-library relations

Administratively the Raffles Library was managed jointly with the colony's museum. This state of affairs was a product of events surrounding the initial proposal to establish a museum in the early 1870s. Originally drawn up by H.L. Randell, Principal Officer of the Straits Settlements, it was approved Sir Andrew Clarke, Governor of the Straits Settlements at the time, with the proviso that a public library be part of the proposed development. But although the two institutions were combined, the museum clearly took precedence as the overall authority for both was vested in the Director, who was always drawn from the museum side of the staff. Given the natural preference of the director for museum work as opposed to library affairs tension between the two halves of the institution was likely inevitable. Seet describes the years 1911 to 1928, for example, as "uneventful for the Library, which was perpetually overshadowed and outshone by the dynamic strides taken by the Museum" (Seet, 1983, p. 60). This lack of

attention extended into the inter-war years as funds were found to finance museum collecting expeditions and an ambitious publication program that saw the production of two journals – *Bulletin of the Raffles Museum* and *Memoirs of the Raffles Museum* – as well as books such as the five-volume *Birds of the Malay Peninsula*. In 1935, the museum actually won a Carnegie grant for a program of archaeological investigations (Seet, 1983, p. 72).

Despite the success of the museum in funding its expansive projects, it is clear that the directors still wanted little to do with library affairs. On accepting the position, J.C. Moulton noted that “the supervision of routine Library work had for many years in the past proved an unwelcome burden on the Director, whose work on the Museum side had perforce to be curtailed” (Seet, 1983, p. 62). In his first *Annual Report* he continued the attack, claiming that the former Director, Richard Hanitsch, experienced difficulties prosecuting his work due to “the union under one control of two progressive but dissimilar institutions – the Museum and Library” (Raffles Library and Museum, 1919, p. 1). Attitudes had not changed by the end of the 1930s. In planning for future needs of the library and museum, F.N. Chasen, in a letter to Committee member Withers-Payne regarding the issue of municipal funding of the Library, suggested that the museum be separated from the library “reopening a question that has come to the surface at intervals for the last fifty years”. More importantly, he argued that “the combination of a fiction book club (for a rather favoured and slightly pampered class), a serious Government reference library, a large public museum and a research department is an anachronism [and] it is also doubtful if colonial funds are justly spent on the first named of those items” (National Archives of Singapore, 1939). Chasen wanted to separate the Library from the Museum, but was quick to divide the Library itself into two – a reference library, which would remain under the control of the museum, and a lending library, which would become a separate institution. Under this scheme, the Museum would keep what it most wanted and needed, while divesting itself of the onerous responsibilities of catering to Singapore’s non-scientific inhabitants (National Archives of Singapore, 1940). In making these claims, Chasen illustrated his lack of understanding as to what a public library could contribute to the colony. His vision remained rooted in the past, when the function of the lending library was almost exclusively for the recreational needs of European officials and their families, rather than a future of expanded access and programs catering to a broader public. Given that this was the mental universe of the Director, it is therefore not surprising that the inter-war years saw little progress towards the achievement of this alternative vision.

Race and class

Complicating the extension of library access to wider numbers of the colony’s population were prevalent attitudes to race and class. Butcher (1979) argues that relations between Europeans and non-Europeans in the inter-war years were marked by social segregation not necessarily enforced by law, but rather by social convention and class distinction. Europeans believed that racial harmony was the norm in British Malaya, but that given the different backgrounds, interests, and tastes of the various races it was socially necessary for space to be created where Europeans could interact with their “own kind”. Reinforcing and perhaps enabling this attitude was the homogeneity between class and racial categories, especially in Singapore. At the top of most organizations were Europeans, almost exclusively so. The opposite was the case

for those at the lowest levels of the organizational hierarchy, which were almost exclusively filled by Asians. Given this situation, questions about library access extended themselves to questions about the nature of the library as a public space. Was it to be the exclusive preserve of Europeans, an enclave of whiteness in the colony? Or was it to become a place where other races, and hence classes, would meet? It would be easier to follow the former course and maintain the status quo as it would involve less potential conflict as the races and classes of colonial Singapore collided. Certainly, this was the view Chasen offered in his letter to the Library Committee outlining his own views on library expansion. In this letter, Chasen explicitly raised racial and class differences as key issues facing the library: "I cannot at the moment see how we shall be able to give good service to the two extreme types of subscribers, firstly the 'tuan besar' paying \$16 P.A. and naturally expecting a reasonably good and prompt service of newish (and clean) books, and secondly the man in the street on a rate lower than our present third class. I feel that we ought to do something for the mass of Singapore's people, but it must be realized that a new poorer class will be practically dead weight financially, and also that they will eventually swamp the more fastidious element among our subscribers. Such a change can be seen working in the Library now. Our third class subscribers are increasing rapidly and now tend to swamp the reading rooms (they are completely dominant on some days at certain hours) and the number of first class subscribers using the magazine rooms is rapidly declining. One now rarely sees a European woman in these rooms and there is something to be said from their point of view for some of our 'thirds' are toughish and a collarless and coatless man with a habit of putting his feet on the chair isn't the best of neighbours during a quiet read of the *Spectator*. These facts must be faced. Maybe the solution lies in a 'downtown' branch library which we should try to run on the cheapest possible lines. The main general library would then be run on pretty much the same lines as at present" (National Archives of Singapore, 1940). Such a solution might have been easier for the library management, but opposition was raised on two levels by the members of the Library Committee, who argued that by putting such a branch in the Orchard Road area it would be competing with Indian book rental shops selling very cheaply "dubious literature". But as well as this pragmatic response George Peet, one of the other committee members, argued that the library should be conducted primarily for the domiciled population "and that the pro-European and upper-class bias in the library should be abandoned once and for all". Attitudes were changing it appears, and this voice seems from our perspective to be prophetic of post-war library policy. In taking the stance that he did, Peet appears to represent a counter-current in the prevalent views on race and class integration in British Malaya. John Butcher (1979), in his study of the European population of British Malaya, notes that Peet had publicly argued that the races should interact more and so his views on the library are consistent. He appears to have wanted a public library to be a place where the races could meet. Unfortunately we will never know if he would have been successful in realizing such a vision. The war intervened and afterwards Singapore was a different place entirely.

Conclusion

This article has described both the beginnings of awareness of the need for wider access to the public library in Singapore during the inter-war years and the lack of

much enthusiasm for such efforts on the part of library management. To a great extent this attitude stemmed from a lack of financial resources symptomatic of much colonial activity during the period. But it was also a product of a tension between the Museum and the Library, housed under the same roof and fighting for scarce resources. Prevalent attitudes towards race and class did not help either. It was assumed that Europeans and Asians would not want to mix outside of work, and so the Library was conceived of as a space where Europeans could be with their “own kind”. All of these factors contributed to a lack of progress in broadening library access. From this perspective the inter-war years were essentially wasted time. Only in the post-war atmosphere of anti-colonialism was change in library routine perceived as necessary by library management as well as a wider swath of public opinion.

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