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# Colonialism, Ethnicity, and Geopolitics in the Development of the Singapore National Library

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## Abstract

This article addresses the social, political, and economic forces that influenced the development of the Singapore National Library in the 1950s and 1960s. Singapore inherited a British colonial system that neglected both the education of indigenous residents and library development. A major impetus for the development of a national library came as the country moved toward independence in the 1950s and '60s, and it became politically necessary to provide a multi-lingual rather than a predominantly English-language library. After independence, the Singapore National Library collections and policies were influenced by the censorship imposed by the government in power in the early 1960s. This article examines these three social factors - colonial inheritance, ethnic issues, and the geopolitical situation - and the effects they had on the early development of the Singapore National Library.

The decades of the 1950s and 1960s were turbulent years for much of Africa and Asia as nationalist calls for freedom succeeded in dismantling the old colonial empires of Britain and France. That the “wind of change,” as former British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan characterized these calls in 1960, also affected the world of libraries should not be surprising. During those stormy years, the fledgling country of Singapore established its national library, incorporating the collections of a colonial library set up to serve English-language readers. How did the Singapore National Library develop into a multi-lingual, professional, public service library, and what influenced its initial policies? My aim is to look at three social factors operating at the time and the effects they had on the early development of the Singapore National Library: colonial inheritance, ethnic issues, and the post-World War II geopolitical situation. Together, these three factors proved instrumental in shaping many of the key policies of the emerging national library in independent Singapore. The library’s story is important, not only as a counterbalance to a Western-centric focus in the library history field, but also as a reminder of the role social and political context plays in the creation and development of any library system.

## Singapore’s Path to Independence

The end of the Pacific War in 1945 was the start of Singapore’s path to independence<sup>1</sup>. Terminally ill after its defeat at the hands of the Japanese, British imperialism could no longer be sustained in the face of American pressure to dismantle the empire and nationalist aspirations for independence throughout much of Asia and Africa. Asian Singaporeans no longer exhibited confidence in or acceptance of the British rulers. The best the British could do was to negotiate the change of power as favorably as possible. In the case of the Malayan peninsula this meant

maintaining Singapore as a free port and naval base while uniting the rest of the Malay states into a federal state under an anti-communist leadership. While full independence from Britain would not come until 1959, an autonomous democratic government was proposed in 1953, with the first elections scheduled for 1955. The 1955 election turned Singapore's political world upside down. A victory by the Labour Front and the People's Action Party (PAP) over the British-backed Singapore Progressive Party, was attributed to a widened franchise and greater interest in the election on the part of the Chinese working class, who had finally found a political voice. After extensive negotiations with the Labour Front, the British Parliament in 1958 passed the State of Singapore Act, and elections were scheduled for 1959. The PAP went on to victory in the 1959 election, becoming the first government of the new state of Singapore. Widely seen as a just and "clean" party, in contrast to the taint of scandal that at the time enveloped the Labour Front, the PAP, its main opposition, won forty-three of the fifty-one seats in the new Legislative Assembly and became the first government of the new state of Singapore.

In 1960, the government opened a permanent home for the new nation's national library. That institution's development in the ensuing years was significantly influenced by three major factors: Singapore's colonial legacy, the ethnic makeup of its population, and the global politics of the 1950s and '60s.

## **Colonial Inheritance and Library Services**

Singapore inherited a colonial system that placed little value on and allocated few resources to education and library services for the indigenous population. Beginning in the early nineteenth century, Singapore was dominated by a foreign merchant class that kept taxes low and had no desire to extend government services to the Asian population.

Singapore had a long history of settlement before the English arrived in the region. Trade had always been of importance to its inhabitants, yet under the free port regime introduced by Stamford Raffles in 1819, trade produced a distorted economy unable to reflect the interests and aspirations of the majority of the island's inhabitants. By the time Singapore became a crown colony in 1867 (the year it was transferred from the jurisdiction of the East India Company to the British government's Colonial Office), a small merchant elite composed mainly of Europeans was entrenched as a powerful lobby intent on keeping Singapore a free trade and low tax zone. From their Singapore base these merchants positioned themselves as intermediaries between local producers of commodities (principally tin and rubber) in the hinterlands, especially Malaya, and the major consuming markets in Europe and North America.<sup>2</sup> Although small in numbers, they had the ear of the Colonial Office in London so that throughout the period of British colonial rule, little was done to expand the role of government in the provision of social services. To have done so would have required new forms of taxation and interference in the private enterprise system that the merchant class was loath to contemplate. Although taxing income had been suggested by various governors as early as 1860 and again in 1910 and 1921, the idea encountered such great opposition that the plans were each time abandoned.<sup>3</sup> The result was that the less wealthy majority were left mostly to their own devices by the government and were generally regarded simply as a source of cheap and transient labor for the trading firms.

In such a situation, it is not surprising to learn that the provision of publicly funded library services to the people of colonial Singapore was almost non-existent. The Raffles Library, established in 1874, was a subscription-based service with its main clientele being the European population in search of entertainment or requiring scientific/scholarly materials for their work. It did not generally collect material in the local languages (exceptions were made for rare and valuable manuscripts and printed works on the history and science of the region) and for much of its history, although theoretically open to all Singaporean residents regardless of race, it was generally less than welcoming in its attitude towards non-Europeans.<sup>4</sup>

Only in the immediate pre-war period do we find evidence of a change in the library's policy. In a letter to the Library Committee of the Raffles Museum and Library dated January 11, 1940, library director Frederick Chasen wrote that he felt "that we ought to do something for the mass of Singapore's people." However, the concerns of economy and social class obviously weighed on his mind as well for he immediately went on to acknowledge that "a new poorer class will be practically dead weight financially, and also that they will eventually swamp the more fastidious element among the subscribers."<sup>5</sup> The Pacific War of 1941-45 interrupted any chance of further library development in Singapore, and the immediate aftermath was a time of reconstruction rather than enhancement. Luckily, the Raffles Library survived relatively unscathed from the conflict.<sup>6</sup>

What did not survive was confidence in or acceptance of the British rulers in the eyes of Asian Singaporeans. Struggle for self-government accelerated and demands for change grew louder<sup>7</sup> leading the colonial authorities to grant a degree of self-government in the 1950s. In 1953, Sir George Rendell was appointed to recommend an appropriate political structure, which he did the following year. Change in the colony's political arrangements meant change in other areas as well, including education. Reflecting a desire to promote Asian-language education, in 1953 the Chinese-educated millionaire Lee Kong Chian offered to donate \$375,000 toward the cost of a national library, if the government guaranteed that it would collect books in the major Asian languages used in Singapore and open the library to all, free of charge. The government was quick to accept.<sup>8</sup> After incorporating the bulk of the collection of the Raffles Library, the National Library of Singapore opened in 1960. In its early years, the library merely further exposed the colonial state's neglect of the country's social development over the past one hundred and thirty years of its rule: Singapore simply lacked the skilled labor needed to run such an institution. Leonard Harrod, the first qualified librarian in charge of the Raffles Library since the end of the war, wrote in his final report of the problems that the library was suffering, even before being saddled with the new National Library building and promises of future greatness. Until 1957, he wrote, none of the library staff could write Chinese characters, the cataloging of books prior to 1957 could not be undertaken due to a lack of trained staff, and reference services were woefully inadequate. Whereas Harrod estimated that the library needed eleven professional staff members, at that time it employed only one full-time (himself) and another part-time.<sup>9</sup>

A year after the PAP took power on promises of corruption-free government, Minister of Culture Sinnathamby Rajaratnam received a memo from his Permanent Secretary that confirmed the picture sketched by Harrod. The Permanent Secretary commented that "development [of the library] is haphazard, mainly owing to lack of suitable staff" and that "it may turn out ... in some respects a white elephant." He went so far as to suggest that the minister himself "to prevent

future embarrassment ... spend two mornings in the library to look into its organization work and plans.”<sup>10</sup> The extent of the problem was such that it was eventually decided to seek out foreign experts in library development who could turn the situation around and train local staff to replace them. The Colombo Plan, an early post-war development scheme for the Asia-Pacific region, would provide the necessary funds.<sup>11</sup>

Two experts eventually were appointed in 1962: John Cole as Director of the National Library and Priscilla Taylor as Associate Director.<sup>12</sup> Taylor was a pioneer of public library services in small communities in New Zealand, but from 1958 onwards she worked overseas, first at the Brooklyn Public Library, USA and later on, after her experience in Singapore, in Nigeria<sup>13</sup> Cole on the other hand had a background in academic libraries and was respected in New Zealand not only for his library work (he was the Assistant Chief Librarian, Alexander Turnbull Library), but also as an author of short stories. He already had experience in southeast Asia having been appointed from 1956 to 1958 as the UNESCO advisor on library development to Indonesia.<sup>14</sup> Cole stayed in Singapore for only three months, but wrote a report deeply critical of the British traditions of library service that had underpinned previous library development in Singapore: “The state of Singapore appears to have been largely bypassed by the very great contributions to all fields of librarianship which emerged in the United States of America in the 1930s and which have since developed to such a peak that American librarianship and American library training have led the world ever since in virtually every field.” Turning to a U.S.-based model of library service would be fitting for the newly independent state of Singapore, he argued, as “American ideals and practice in library service were ... closely geared to the needs of rapidly developing countries emerging from the constrictions of a colonial heritage.” It was the New Zealand experience, he claimed, that made him suggest this course of action:

We in New Zealand, emerging from our chrysalis of English colonialism, threw off what we felt to be the shackles of restricted English practice and turned to the United States of America ... Commencing in the early 1930s, almost without exception, our senior librarians were sent to the United States of America, usually with Carnegie Corporation assistance, to study American libraries and to train or observe in American Library Schools. At a time when our own libraries were stagnating in outmoded practices, influential librarians were in this way exposed for the first time to modern thought in librarianship, and progressive reforms began to take place almost immediately.

Cole, like his predecessor, Leonard Harrod, also pointed to a serious lack of trained staff: “A primary need is to build up a nucleus of thoroughly experienced professional staff capable of competing for the highest executive posts.”<sup>15</sup>

There was slow, but steady progress towards achieving higher levels of staffing over the rest of the 1960s. The new government of Singapore sought to rectify the limitations of colonial development policy. It gave scholarships (many with Colombo Plan assistance) for several library employees to travel abroad and earn degrees in the United Kingdom and New Zealand so that by 1963, the number of professionally qualified librarians working at the National Library had grown to sixteen.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, however, service needs were expanding. After the National Library in 1958 dropped the subscription previously charged by the Raffles Library, the number of Singaporeans using the library increased exponentially so that, although the number

of staff was growing, the workload was increasing as well.<sup>17</sup> At a board meeting in early 1965, it was noted that “the capacity of the staff was also being strained to its limits” and that although “the number of qualified librarians in Singapore was now 36 ... this still fell far short of the number required.”<sup>18</sup> Incidents of rude staff and service delays were attributed to “the strains being put on the Library because of its staff shortages.”<sup>19</sup> The following year, however, seems to have been the turning point in terms of the library finally gaining a rough equilibrium in staffing requirements and demands for service. The minutes of the February 1968 board meeting record that its members were “pleased to note the increase in the number of qualified library staff and felt that the position had improved considerably.” The neglect of Singapore’s publicly funded library system under British colonialism was at last coming to an end.

## **The Chinese Question**

Of the many ethnic communities that comprise Singapore, the Chinese are the most numerous. Chinese settlers migrated to Singapore from very early times with their numbers expanding rapidly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the midst of much poverty and deprivation, successful Chinese merchants and businessmen filled the void in social support resulting from the hands-off attitude of the state, establishing hospitals, fire fighting forces, and even a clean water supply.<sup>20</sup> The Chinese merchant class came to depend on the fact that the British did not want to invest very heavily in social infrastructure before the Pacific War; therefore the merchants hold over the masses was very much predicated on maintaining cohesiveness among the Chinese community and a continued sense of loyalty to the motherland.

Given the fact that their power base lay in forging a distinctive Chinese identity among the masses and their own genuine attachment to China, it is not surprising that in the early twentieth century the merchant elite also began to establish a comprehensive system of Chinese schools that encouraged students to identify with China and provided them with a Chinese-inspired education.<sup>21</sup> The merchants were also responsible for developing an island-wide system of small reading rooms around the same time that in effect formed an independently operated library system catering to the Chinese-speaking population. The reading rooms continued the job the schools began by making China the center of interest among adult Singaporean Chinese.<sup>22</sup>

The Chinese school and library system was successful in achieving its aims. Many Singaporean Chinese continued to view China as their true home and as a result events in that country aroused great interest. When, for example, the Chinese Empire was entering its final years in the first decade of the twentieth century, the community was polarized between forces loyal to the old Qing dynasty and the younger reformers in the Kuomintang (KMT). Later on, a similar polarization occurred around followers of the KMT and the Chinese Communist Party, which actively sought supporters in Singapore from the 1920s onwards.<sup>23</sup> And during the 1930s the rising levels of conflict between China and Japan also aroused great emotion in Singapore. Calls for an anti-Japanese boycott and fund-raising to support wounded Chinese soldiers and refugees gained huge support.<sup>24</sup>

While the British could tolerate these institutions of Chinese nationalism, the new government of Singapore, anxiously embarking on the road to independence during the late 1950s and early

1960s, could not. A state in which the majority of its population had significant loyalties to another country, and even factions within that country, was not acceptable. Karl Trocki writes that the People's Action Party (PAP) "needed their [Chinese Singaporean] votes to win elections, but it was determined to prevent them from developing an autonomous political or social presence. This meant crushing ... every sort of organization that grew out of the Chinese-educated population. This included everything from secret societies, to the SCCC [Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce], Chinese-language schools and newspapers."<sup>25</sup> The government's targets also included the Chinese operated reading rooms. Together they constituted an important avenue for information dissemination among Singaporean Chinese.

I would argue that much of the Singapore government's interest in the National Library at that time was a result of the perceived need to challenge the reading rooms by providing multilingual library services. Minister of Culture Rajaratnam made it clear in a newspaper interview that although the library in the past was dominated by English, this could not continue in an independent Singapore. In that article, the journalist noted that the "relatively meager Chinese and Malay sections of the National Library are to be expanded greatly as soon as feasible."<sup>26</sup> On the occasion of the opening of the new library building in 1960 the minister repeated his belief that "a truly National Library could not be created in Singapore unless it was realized that it had to cater to four language groups."<sup>27</sup>

The public concern of the government for a multilingual library was matched by private concern over the need to expand rapidly the dissemination of Chinese language materials. In a letter discussing the library's development plans from the Minister of Finance, Goh Keng Swee, to Rajaratnam, Goh wrote that "there is one basic problem which has so far not been mentioned, and that is the expansion of Chinese books." He went on to note the government's policy of "absorb[ing] the Chinese-educated into the system. We have given parity of treatment in education and have opened avenues of employment for them. In the planning for library expansion, this must be an important element."<sup>28</sup> Rajaratnam supported Goh's stance, agreeing to take "action on your suggestion to form a committee of experts to study the question of expansion of the Chinese services", noting that although "certain progress has been made" he was "convinced that much more can be done."<sup>29</sup>

The committee, formally named the Committee on Service in Chinese Language, was duly established in 1964, consisting of members from Singapore's academic community, the Ministry of Finance, and the country's publishing industry. It was chaired by Fong Sip Chee, Parliamentary Secretary, Ministry of Culture, and had as its secretary Louis To Wu of the National Library. In its report to the National Library Board (NLB), the Committee made a number of recommendations regarding future library policy, among which were to employ more staff competent in both English and Chinese, establish a Chinese cataloguing section, develop a union catalog for Chinese materials, and increase the book vote (acquisition budget) for Chinese language materials from one-fourteenth of the overall budget to one fourth for the next two years and one-sixth after that.<sup>30</sup>

Officials at the National Library took the concerns of the government seriously. As early as 1962, Cole had recommended the creation of a special \$200,000 fund for the rapid purchase of Chinese and Malay books.<sup>31</sup> In the same year, two Chinese-educated staff members were given

scholarships to study library science in New Zealand; however, a problem the library faced in this regard was that Chinese-educated staff tended not to be fluent enough in English to gain admittance to the overseas institutions.<sup>32</sup> Bibliographic materials in Chinese (as well as Malay and Tamil) were also developed – in 1967, for example, a science bibliography for secondary schools was produced in Chinese.<sup>33</sup>

When it came to collection development policy, however, the NLB had reservations about the wisdom of the Committee's advice, considering the requested budget increase far too large and even "unrealistic."<sup>34</sup> The board argued that "although there was substantial increase in the issue of non-English books, the main demand was still for books in English."<sup>35</sup> A few months later, the board even signaled its intent to reduce the rate of non-English book purchasing "since the difference in the proportion of non-English to English books in the library was decreasing."<sup>36</sup>

Part of the reason for the hesitancy to commit more resources to building up the collection in Malay, Chinese, and Tamil was no doubt due to the book budget. The board felt that it was barely adequate for the development of a collection in only one language, let alone four. In its first report (1960-63), the board argued that "the Government has to face this expense if parity of treatment in education is given to the Chinese-educated and if the National Language [Malay] is to develop as a means of learning and strengthening the national culture."<sup>37</sup> However, the years following this plea were tough ones for the library as Singapore first found itself in the middle of a serious conflict with its huge Indonesian neighbor and then later had to prepare for the closure of the British military bases and its economic backlash.<sup>38</sup> The budget cuts of 1964-68 meant that 1963 was something of a golden year for library acquisition, with 17,000 new Chinese books added to the collection. At the same time, however, 40,000 English language books were purchased so that the disparity between the two language groups only grew wider. In fact, from 1959 to 1967, only in 1960 did the number of Chinese books added exceed that of English titles. By 1966 the library had 65,500 Chinese, 169,000 English, 33,500 Malay, and 18,000 Tamil books.<sup>39</sup> Yet despite the continued disparity between the numbers of English vs. non-English language books, the government appears not to have taken much interest in the library's collection policy in the following years. One reason for this disinterest was the changing political scene. In the 1968 elections, the PAP won all seats and garnered 84 percent of the vote. People were genuinely impressed with the government's record on the economy and social issues in the few years the party had been in power. And the opposition was hopelessly disunited.<sup>40</sup> Thus the PAP leadership must have felt relatively secure in regards to Chinese civil society and its institutions. Furthermore, the government's priorities had fundamentally shifted as a response to Singapore's expulsion from Malaysia in 1965 after a few short years of merger. As a result the country had to define its own course for the future. It increasingly "called for a forward looking, collective orientation committed to economic achievement and problem-solving" that would require of the population a forgetting of the past and an embracing of the future.<sup>41</sup> In a world where English increasingly was seen as the language of the future, Chinese must have appeared an anachronism.

## **Geopolitics: Communism, China, and the Cold War**

The newly independent nations of Asia and Africa were caught up in the 1950s and 1960s in the Cold War maelstrom that pitted the United States against the Soviet Union. In much of southeast Asia, including Singapore, Communist movements and their sympathizers occupied strong positions. The Malayan Communist Party (MCP) had spearheaded resistance to the Japanese occupation during the Pacific War and its leaders were considered heroes to the majority of Chinese Singaporeans even after the return of the British in 1945. The party's popular support was such that the British had to legalize it and bestow honors on its war heroes. Utilizing its legal status, the MCP began to organize a strong labor movement around the Singapore Federation of Trade Unions (SFTU). By 1947, three quarters of the unionized labor force was affiliated with the SFTU. But as the economy recovered and the government clamped down on civil liberties as a result of the growing armed insurgency in Malaya, the MCP and its hold on the unions was broken. This did not weaken the labor movement permanently, however. By the early 1950s it was again riding a surge of support fuelled by growing discontent that the economic boom created by the Korean War was not being equally shared. The People's Action Party, led by Lee Kuan Yew, attempted to make use of this population of alienated and exploited individuals in its successful bids for power in the 1955 and 1959 elections. Lee had discovered the potential of the left while working as an attorney for trade union leaders and he realized "that an alliance with such men, dangerous though it might be, offered the only path to political success."<sup>42</sup> The PAP platform was, rhetorically at least, quite radical, advocating immediate independence, socialism, and an end to the emergency regulations that curtailed civil liberties, but at the same time, Lee was careful to cultivate links with the British as well. When he won power in 1959, it was with their blessing and support. His election was also the start of a careful process of eroding the power of the left "using the threat of British force, the power of the Internal Security Act, and the ability to dominate the legislative agenda."<sup>43</sup>

Concerned that an independent Singapore might move too far to the left, the government of Malaya in 1961 held out to Singapore the offer of merger — an offer the PAP government was eager to accept, believing that Singapore was incapable of surviving for long as an independent state. However, the anti-communist nature of the Malayan regime was deeply troubling to many of the PAP's more radical members and the leftist forces within the PAP formally split in 1961, creating a new party, the Barisan Sosialis (Socialist Front) to continue their struggle. In the process the Barisan Sosialis nearly crippled the PAP by taking away most of its grassroots supporters. What saved the PAP at this point was an attempted rebellion in nearby Brunei, which prompted Singapore's internal security forces in early 1963 to launch Operation Cold Store. The result was the arrest of numerous leftist leaders suspected of supporting the rebellion (many of them occupying senior positions in the Barisan Sosialis). Seizing this opportunity, the PAP leadership moved quickly. It agreed to a merger of Singapore and Malay, plus Sarawak and Sabah, in September 1963. In August Lee Kuan Yew declared unilateral independence and called an election. With much of the opposition in jail or in disarray, the PAP secured a majority government with thirty-seven seats. Two weeks later, the state of Malaysia was born. By 1965, in a sign of its frustration and growing impotence, the Barisan Sosialis boycotted the parliamentary elections leaving the PAP to win all seats in the legislative assembly. The PAP government's merger with Malay, however, was not to be long lasting. The vision of the political elites in each country differed too much and distrust was strong on both sides. In the summer of 1965 the central government of Malaysia decided to expel Singapore from the union. Independence was officially declared on August 9, 1965.

For Singapore's library system, the greatest effect of the Cold War came primarily through state media controls imposed by the PAP government. More specifically, four laws provided the PAP government with a great deal of power over the creation and dissemination of media: the Internal Security Act (1963), the Sedition Act (1964), the Undesirable Publications Act (1967, 1968), and the Essential Regulations Act (1966, 1973). These four laws made it illegal to create or disseminate various kinds of media if the content was deemed by the government to adversely affect the national interest, the security of the state, or the morals of the society. (Kokkeong Wong 2001, 55-56)<sup>44</sup> Communist literature (as well as crude anti-Communist literature), including the Communist Manifesto and the works of Mao Tse-Tung and Ho Chi Minh, were banned with regularity during the 1960s.<sup>45</sup>

The question for the library then was what to do with material in the collection that was found in violation of the law and whether or not the library should continue to collect related material in the future. The board seems to have been of the opinion that "censorship of books on morals or political grounds" should not be one of its functions, preferring to leave that job to the government.<sup>46</sup>

At one board meeting the Library Director told the assembled members that the policy of the library was "for such publications to be removed from the public shelves and the general stacks." However, the board decided that removing the material was not a balanced response. Instead, it instructed the director to "give access to these materials to reputable scholars."<sup>47</sup> But the board members were careful; the category "reputable scholar" was hedged with further limitations. The individual in question had to work at a recognized university, the research had to be seen as "genuine," and the government was to be informed of the request. In terms of collecting similar material in the future, the matter was decided the next year with the members of the board agreeing to seek exemption from the importation ban on undesirable books as long as they guaranteed the government that these would not be part of the regular circulating collection and would only be made available for serious research purposes.<sup>48</sup> This was no doubt made easier by the fact that the library fell under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture, which also had responsibility for administering the Undesirable Publications (UDP) Act.<sup>49</sup>

Chinese books created special problems for the library. In 1963, Louis Wu, head of the Chinese department of the library wrote a short report on the problems he faced collecting Chinese materials. He noted that since the end of the Chinese civil war in 1950 the supply of books from China "has been practically disrupted on political grounds [with] the supply ... irregular and uncertain."<sup>50</sup> He also noted that the UDP ordinance (the older version of the UDP act of 1967) had resulted in the ban of books produced by 53 Chinese and Hong Kong publishers and lengthy delays by Singapore's customs authorities for the works of other publishers in these countries. This observation was shared by Cecil Byrd, who noted that Chinese language material was inevitably scrutinized by customs officials whereas English language publications were examined only selectively (in 1961 and 1962 none at all were examined).<sup>51</sup> (Wu also noted a number of other problems; namely, the small market for Chinese language materials outside of China and Taiwan, which made local booksellers hesitant to stock Chinese language items, and the lack of bibliographic aids to Chinese language materials, which made knowing what one was buying difficult.) Wu's solution to the problem was to arrange for a permanent representative in Hong Kong, either an agent or a library staff member. This individual would be expected to have

a good knowledge of Chinese books, the collection needs of the library, the UDP ordinance and the Hong Kong book market. Once purchased, the books could be amassed into shipments large enough to warrant requesting the Customs Office to inspect the books in the library where they could at least be made available for processing instead of languishing in a warehouse. Such a scheme, Wu believed, would enable the collection to be rapidly built up and made available to the public as quickly as possible.<sup>52</sup> Wu's views were taken up by Priscilla Taylor, then Director of the National Library. She requested funding for Wu himself to travel to Hong Kong towards the end of 1963, but nothing came of the proposal. The government was worried that not enough preparatory work had been done in order to justify the expenditure. There were also more political concerns behind the decision, concerns that reflected the government's awareness that the Chinese Singaporean community was split between supporters of the new regime in Beijing and its enemies. In a letter to the Minister of Culture, the Permanent Secretary questioned the suitability of Wu to head what it called the "very delicate" task of acquiring Chinese materials "in the context of our population and the prevailing political conditions," suggesting that "only a committee of experts who are alive to these conditions and who are liberal in outlook could render the proper advice" and that "the wrong selection of books arising from ... parochialism could lead to the National Library being held in contempt by the Chinese educated population."<sup>53</sup> In early 1964, when the Committee on Service in Chinese Language reported its findings, it recommended employing more experienced staff and developing appropriate cataloguing tools. However, it did not explicitly address the collection development concerns of the Permanent Secretary.<sup>54</sup>

Singapore's geopolitical situation at the height of the Cold War made the government acutely sensitive about what ideas its citizens were exposed to. Censorship became a norm as a result. For the National Library it created the need for a policy with which to deal most efficiently and effectively with the government's demands.

## Conclusion

Libraries are not insulated in any way from the wider forces or issues at work in society. Three such issues significantly influenced the development of the Singapore national library system. First, the colonial inheritance of a merchant-dominated economy, dedicated to low taxes and a laissez-faire government policy regarding social programs, stifled social initiatives and left the library system lacking the skilled labor it needed to meet the needs of a newly independent nation. Second, the development of strong links between many of the island's Chinese inhabitants and their former homeland, coupled with the insecurity of a young state intolerant of rival centers of power, prompted the library to build up its Chinese collection and become more generally multi-lingual. Finally, the development of Cold War tensions, which served to polarize the population into pro and anti-communist positions, justified, in the eyes of the state at least, the imposition of censorship laws, forcing the library to develop its own censorship policy as a result, thereby complicating its acquisition of Chinese materials. These are not, of course, the only issues and forces that impacted the library system in Singapore in these years, but together they certainly helped to set the tone for much of the early development of the library in that country.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> This section and subsequent accounts of Singapore's political history rely on Mary Turnbull, A history of Singapore 1819-1988. (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989), 216-287.

<sup>2</sup> Carl Trocki, Singapore: wealth, power and the culture of control. (London: Routledge, 2006), 28-31.

<sup>3</sup> Turnbull, History, 233.

<sup>4</sup> Brendan Luyt, "Centres of Calculation and Unruly Colonists: the Colonial Library in Singapore and its Users, 1874 to 1900," Journal of Documentation 64 (3): 386-396.

<sup>5</sup> Letter from F.N. Chasen to the Library Committee, January 11, 1940. National Archives of Singapore, MSA 1155.

<sup>6</sup> Khiam Keong Seet, A place for the people: the story of a national library. (Singapore: Times Books International, 1983), 75.

<sup>7</sup> Trocki, Singapore, 107-109.

<sup>8</sup> Seet, Place for the People, 100.

<sup>9</sup> Leonard Harrod, Report on the Raffles National Library service since 1954 (unpublished), no date. National Archives of Singapore, Ministry of Culture General Files, AR 16, 9, 1, 2, 6, 13.

<sup>10</sup> Memo from Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Culture, to Minister of Culture, no date. National Archives of Singapore, Ministry of Culture General Files, AR16.

<sup>11</sup> Letter from Lee Siow Kong, Permanent Secretary, Culture, to Oon Khye Kiang, Permanent Secretary, Finance, November 19, 1959. National Archives of Singapore, Ministry of Culture General Files, AR16.

<sup>12</sup> Seet, Place for the People, 125.

<sup>13</sup> Anonymous. 1974. Obituary: Priscilla Harris, New Zealand Libraries 37 (3): 136-137.

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- <sup>14</sup> Anonymous. 1967. John Reece Cole. The Turnbull Library Record. New Series Vol 1 (1): 34.
- <sup>15</sup> J.R. Cole. Report on Government of the State of Singapore National Library, August 1, 1962 (unpublished). National Archives of Singapore, Ministry of Culture.
- <sup>16</sup> National Library Board, Report of the National Library Board (5<sup>th</sup> December, 1960 – 30<sup>th</sup> September, 1963). (Singapore: NLB, 1963), 7-8.
- <sup>17</sup> Seet, Place for the People, 112.
- <sup>18</sup> National Library Board, Minutes of Meeting, February 26, 1965.
- <sup>19</sup> National Library Board, Minutes of Meeting, January 17, 1967.
- <sup>20</sup> Hong Liu and Sin-Kiong Wong, Singapore Chinese society in transition: business, politics, and socio-economic change. (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 45.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid., 108.
- <sup>22</sup> Ching Fatt Yong and R.B. McKenna, The Kuomintang movement in British Malaya 1912-1949. (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1990), 59, 84.
- <sup>23</sup> Trocki, Singapore, 100.
- <sup>24</sup> Hong Liu and Sin-Kiong Wong, Singapore Chinese Society, 36.
- <sup>25</sup> Trocki, Singapore, 129.
- <sup>26</sup> “Raffles Library to get new, less English, look now,” Singapore Free Press, July 4, 1959.
- <sup>27</sup> “Library should serve all groups – minister,” Straits Times, June 18, 1960.
- <sup>28</sup> Letter from Goh Keng Swee to S. Rajaratnam, December 31, 1962. National Archives of Singapore, Ministry of Culture General Files, AR53.
- <sup>29</sup> Letter from S. Rajaratnam to Goh Keng Swee, March 21, 1963. National Archives of Singapore, Ministry of Culture, General Files, AR53.

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- <sup>30</sup> National Library Board, Minutes of Meeting, December 18, 1964.
- <sup>31</sup> National Library Board, Minutes of Meeting, April 24, 1962.
- <sup>32</sup> National Library Board, Minutes of Meeting, December 14, 1962, May 22, 1964.
- <sup>33</sup> National Library Board, Minutes of Meeting, May 9, 1967.
- <sup>34</sup> National Library Board, Minutes of Meeting, December 18, 1964.
- <sup>35</sup> National Library Board, Minutes of Meeting, February 26, 1965.
- <sup>36</sup> National Library Board, Minutes of Meeting, July 16, 1965.
- <sup>37</sup> National Library Board, Report, 6.
- <sup>38</sup> National Library Board, Minutes of Meeting, January 23, 1964, February 14, 1968.
- <sup>39</sup> National Library Board, Minutes of Meeting, February 13, 1967.
- <sup>40</sup> Turnbull, History, 294-295.
- <sup>41</sup> Lian Kwen Fee, "The nation-state and the sociology of Singapore," in Reading culture: textual practices in Singapore, ed. Phyllis Chew (Singapore; Times Academic Press, 1999), 41.
- <sup>42</sup> Turnbull, History, 223, 228, 233, 248.
- <sup>43</sup> Trocki, Singapore, 119, 122.
- <sup>44</sup> Kokkeong Wong, Media and culture in Singapore: a theory of controlled commodification (Cresskill, New Jersey: Hampton Press, 2001), 55-56
- <sup>45</sup> Cecil Byrd, Books in Singapore: a survey of publishing, printing, bookselling, and library activity in the Republic of Singapore (Singapore: Chopmen Enterprises, 1970), 68.
- <sup>46</sup> National Library Board, Minutes of Meeting, May 21, 1965.
- <sup>47</sup> <sup>47</sup> National Library Board, Minutes of Meeting, February 22, 1963.
- <sup>48</sup> National Library Board, Minutes of Meeting, December 18, 1964.
- <sup>49</sup> Byrd, Books in Singapore, 67.

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<sup>50</sup> Louis Wu, Report on Chinese Book Acquisition (unpublished), July 6, 1963. National Archives of Singapore, Ministry of Culture General Files, AR53.

<sup>51</sup> Byrd, Books in Singapore, 70.

<sup>52</sup> Wu, n.p.

<sup>53</sup> Letter from Lian Hock Lian to Minister of Culture, October 21, 1963, National Archives of Singapore, Ministry of Culture General Files, AC53.

<sup>54</sup> National Library Board, Minutes of Meeting, December 18, 1964.