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Author(s)	Luyt, Brendan; Ho, Swee Ann
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Reading, the Library, and the Elderly: a Singapore case study

Brendan Luyt, Ho Swee Ann

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Email: {Brendan, HOSW0002}@ntu.edu.sg

Abstract

Singapore is now one of the fastest aging societies in the world. By 2030 those over 65 years old are expected to number 1.41 million strong, 26.8 percent of the country's entire population (Asher & Nandy 2008). Given these numbers, it is not surprising that aging is a key concern in Singapore. This article reports on a qualitative study of thirty-two individuals over the age of fifty-five who frequented one branch of Singapore's public library system. It sheds light on the current views of the elderly on their reading and some of the facilities that the library currently offers them. In particular it argues that attention needs to be paid to four issues: gender disparities, class differences, the effects of ageism, and an instrumental view of reading.

Keywords

Elderly, senior citizens, Singapore, Asia, reading, library services

Introduction

Singapore is now one of the fastest aging societies in the world. From 7.2 percent of the population in 2000, those over 65 years old now represent 10 percent of the total. By 2030 this group is expected to number 1.41 million strong, 26.8 percent of the country's entire population (Asher & Nandy, 2008). Given these numbers, it is not surprising that aging is a key concern in Singapore. The government's response has been to stress the need for the community and family to care for the aged. In keeping with the supposedly Confucian mindset of the majority Chinese on the island, that state's role is to be minimal, for in traditional Confucian society it has been the responsibility of the male children to care for their parents (Lee, 1986). Of course, the state does recognize, to some extent, the heavy burden care of the elderly puts on their families and has responded through a number of policy initiatives. Nevertheless, as the population of elderly increases over the next decades, the burden is set to grow much heavier.

Given this worrisome development, it appears that Singaporean institutions will need to at least expand and most likely rethink their approaches to dealing with the elderly. Among these institutions is the country's library system. Can it provide services that appeal to the growing number of elderly in Singapore? This study hopes to answer that question positively by shedding light on the current views of the elderly on their reading and the facilities that the library currently offers them. But the study has wider implications than the local Singaporean context. Most of the developed world also faces the issue of an aging population and librarians in these

countries will be equally called to develop programmes that enable the elderly to cope with their condition. The experiences of Singapore's elderly, while in many cases the product of local conditions, also have a more universal story to tell about the problems and constraints facing the elderly. This is all the more the case given the multi-cultural nature of many of these societies. There is an Asia that lives within the West so that the reading experience of Singapore's elderly may have lessons for the rest of the developed world as well.

Review of the Literature

While the reading of the elderly has not received the same level of attention as that for the young, a fair body of literature has accumulated over the years. For convenience this work is divided below into three sections: reading benefits, reading behaviour, and reading obstacles of the elderly.

Reading benefits

Carsello and Creaser (1983) in a study involving a little over two hundred adults aged 50 or above found that a significant number used reading as a means to cope with loneliness. M. Cecil Smith argues that reading is a key means by which the elderly can maintain contact with the wider society. Smith also argues that reading is a good means for the elderly to cope with stress and relax. And contrary to the assumption that reading is a solitary activity, Smith suggests that it instead, through discussions of what has been read, allows for social interaction (418). Wolf believes that reading can help the elderly come to terms with the aging process and that it helps fulfill lifelong needs. Using a combination of survey and interview techniques with a sample of adults ranging in age from 68 to 98 he found that reading satisfied basic curiosity about the world and acted as an indicator of social responsibility and hence of self-esteem for many (for example, some of the respondents would read stories to others or would read the obituaries for news of the death of their friends). Wolf also found that the elderly who read had a greater tendency to participate in social events. For his respondents reading was a means of relaxation, "a chance to converse with others, a means to strengthen inner resources" and, in general, "to perpetuate an ongoing communication with life" (Wolf 1977).

Reading habits/behaviour

Haase et al. note that the elderly are selective readers, who read with a purpose and that behind their reading choices are "strategies of economy" that aim to save time and effort (232). From the findings of her own study, Chatman (1991) would likely agree with this assessment. The elderly women of the retirement community she studied also stressed that their use of media, including reading matter, was purposeful. In particular, the elderly claimed to choose material based on how "good" it was, where goodness was equated to seriousness. M. Cecil Smith (1993), summarizing a body of work done on the reading preferences of the elderly in the United States, noted that they tended to read more magazines and newspapers than books. Newspapers appeared especially important to the elderly as sources of local community information. Scales and Rhee (2001), in a more recent study of adult reading behaviour in general, also found newspapers to be the most read material by those over 65 years old. Magazines and the Bible were the second and third popular choices. Novels held the fourth position. A study of the users

of a large print collection of a local public library in the United States found that those over fifty had a wide variety of reading interests. Both men and women enjoyed books on history, travel, art, finance, and best-sellers. Women also enjoyed cookbooks, humour, and current events. Men added science and technology to their favourites. But for both genders, health and medical materials were not of as much interest. Fiction was also popular, especially mysteries, best-sellers, historical fiction, classics, and crime fiction (Gourlie, 1996). Chen and Fu (2008) in a survey study of Taiwanese elderly found that reading was rated last of four leisure activities (reading books, watching television, socializing with friends, and physical activities) in terms of frequency and enjoyability and that higher levels of education were associated with more reading. In another study, Chen was able to classify the elderly into four groups: non-readers, less-diversified readers, diversified readers in print, and diversified readers in print and digital media. Two-thirds of the sample fell into the first group. Twenty percent were classified as less diversified readers, meaning that they read mostly newspapers. A third of the sample were diversified users of print (newspapers, magazines, and books) while only 1.4 percent could be considered diversified in both print and digital formats (Chen, 2008).

Reading Obstacles

Writing in the 1970s, Kingston, after reviewing the literature of the elderly and their reading problems, argued that “it may be that the failure of more older persons to read more widely is due to society’s failure to meet the needs of this large segment of our society” (Kingston, 1977, 3). For him, “intellectual and physical disabilities apparently are not major factors in the lack of reading among older people” (Kingston 1977, 3). Since that time, other authors have reached the same conclusion: the major problems facing the elderly are social in nature. Haase et al., for example, argues that “adults do not become less intelligent as they become older” noting that psychologists suggest that cognitive abilities actually peak only at fifty-five years of age and that the elderly are faced only with the obsolescence of their knowledge, which for him is an issue of appropriate “retraining” (Hase 1979). Similarly, Gentile and McMillan argue that the development of successful reading programs for the elderly requires overcoming society’s view of the aged as incompetent and inferior. Instead he argues that the elderly have “unparalleled capacities for high-level comprehension and interpretation” and “with minds freed from continuous strivings of bygone years are now willing and able to reflect on life’s mysteries” (Gentile & McMillan 1979, 218). Tied to this is the view of Rigg and Kazemal who criticize what they see as the prevailing attitude underlying many reading initiatives: that the elderly value literacy for its instrumental or functional benefits. These authors argue that this is not necessarily the case – that the elderly don’t want to go back to school but want instead to “be able to use reading and writing as a means of engaging in social interactions with their peers” (Rigg and Kazemal 1983). Wolf (1977) shares a similar view that the reading of the elderly is “not related to functional competencies” but used as “a means to perpetuate an ongoing connection with life” (420). In a study designed to shed light on the low participation rate of the elderly in literacy programs, Fisher (1987) also stresses the social implications of ignoring the elderly’s own perception of their needs, noting that these perceptions may not match those of the program designers and that the social conditions in which many of the elderly live may impede their participation in programs of reading. One of the key factors in this regard concerns the importance of friends and family in creating a supporting environment for reading in the lives of the elderly. Scales and Biggs (1987) note that in their study many were not “interested in hearing

about the [research] subjects read” and that “one possible consequence of this lack of interest is that elderly adults may begin to view reading as an uninteresting activity” (530). Leung et al. (2008) in a study of the elderly in Taiwan also stressed the importance of families and peers in their literacy decisions. This took the form of physical resources at times, but also the intangible form of encouragement of their efforts. But equally important to the reading lives of the elderly are their past experiences. In another study of the Taiwanese elderly, Su-Yen Chen et al. (2008) found that the level of education played an important role in determining whether reading was a habitual leisure practice or not. Delahage and Ehrich (2008) argue that a principle cause of lack of interest in reading stems from bad experiences during their years at school which have inculcated a belief that reading is of no use to them. Even wider social factors come to the fore in explaining the preference or lack thereof of the elderly to reading and adult education more generally. In a comparative study of Australian and Chinese older adult learners, Picton and Yuan (1998) found that while the Chinese participated in learning activities for instrumental and community-oriented reasons, whereas the Australians participated more for mental stimulation and personal pleasure. Similarly, Chinese were motivated by cognitive gaps, whereas the Australians were motivated by curiosity. And in a study focusing on the elderly of Taiwan and their attitudes towards adult learning, Leung et al. (2008) found that many of their respondents perceived adult learning “as a kind of compensation” for the hardships in their earlier lives (1109). The authors also noted a Confucian connection with the mostly positive attitude to learning they discovered.

Most studies of reading and the elderly have been centred on North America or, to a lesser extent, Europe. The few studies from Taiwan suggest that attention to the issue is now starting to attract interest in Asia. However, far as the authors are aware, no comparable work has been done for Singapore. Given, as noted above, Singapore’s distinction as having one of the fastest growing populations of elderly people in the world, this is an important gap. Furthermore, since much of the literature on reading and the elderly stresses the social nature of the obstacles they face, it is likely that a “one size fits all” mentality to remedial policy is unlike to work. What is needed is a local contextualization of the issues facing the elderly that allows for comparison with other cultures, but does not simply assume similarities. This is the aim of this study. Using a qualitative approach we have sought to understand the perceptions of a segment of Singapore’s elderly population with an aim to exploring the underlying social context that has influenced their reading preferences and choices.

Method

The study interviewed thirty-two elderly library users at the Toa Payoh Public Library from February 6 to 20, 2009 at different times of the day and on different days of the week to reach a wider spread of senior citizens. It was observed that most of the senior citizens left the library by 6 p.m., probably for dinner. There were very few there at night. Respondents had to meet the following criteria: be 55 years old or above, educated in a Chinese-stream school, or reading only Chinese materials for leisure or information. The decision to interview only Singaporeans with Chinese ancestry was made for the pragmatic reason that the majority of Singapore’s population is of Chinese ethnicity. Further studies in the future will hopefully shed light on the reading behaviours of the other two major ethnic groups, Malay and Indian. Both male and

female senior citizens were interviewed. The interview was conducted purely in Mandarin or a combination of Mandarin and English for those conversant in both languages. Dialects were used when necessary. The respondents were asked a series of questions to gather information on their current and past reading habits, their reading needs, and whether the library was fulfilling these needs. Twenty-six of the interviews were recorded on an MP3, while another six could not be recorded in audio owing to excessive background noise. These six interviews were recorded in writing instead. The interviews are semi-structured and lasted between twenty-five minutes to forty-five minutes, depending on how responsive and open the interviewees (respondents) were. The audio recordings were transcribed and analyzed in detail to draw out patterns which were used to interpret their experiences and their behaviour. Each was labeled with a code, for example, RM8, which simply means the eighth male respondent accepted for an interview. These codes, rather than individual names, are used to identify respondents in the rest of this article.

Findings

Of the thirty-two respondents, twenty-three were male and nine female. Their ages ranged from 56 to 82 years old with the average being 68 (see Table 1). In terms of their education the range varied from no official schooling to graduation from university. Most had at least a few years of primary education. Four graduated from university and two held diplomas. Another two had graduated from high school (see Table 2). Those who left school without graduating from secondary school were asked why they left. Many cited the poverty of their families (10). Others decided not to continue for reasons of aptitude (7), interruption due to war (1), didn't believe that Chinese education would be useful (1), or, in the case of two women respondents, because they were needed to help with domestic responsibilities. The majority of respondents read since they were children (18). But for many, their generation was the first in the family to be able to read at all (10). Respondents recalled obtaining their reading material when young from a variety of sources. Many purchased books (8), but others relied on school (3) or public libraries (5). Four respondents mentioned that they shared books with friends and another four rented books from street-side vendors (mostly comics). The public library was used by these respondents primarily as a source of books and newspapers. Books were borrowed by eighteen of the respondents and library newspapers read by twenty. Thirteen respondents used the library solely for borrowing books while fifteen read only newspapers at the library (all of these were men). This group of elderly individuals read for a variety of reasons. Thirteen read for knowledge or awareness of what was happening in the community or country. Another seven read because they believed reading made for a healthy mind. A larger group read "to kill time" as a number of them put it (10). Only four mentioned interest or, in one case "joy" as a reason for reading while two noted that reading had become a habit. Respondents were also asked if they used the library's senior citizen room and their opinion on its usefulness. Most did not use it (19). Only four claimed to be regular users while another five use it occasionally. Two hadn't heard of it. The lack of use of the senior citizen room is made more understandable when their attitudes are considered. Most held negative opinions on the room, associating it with sleeping (10), unhygienic conditions (2), the uneducated (2), and even death (1). Others saw it more usefully as a place where the elderly could find air-conditioning (4).

Table 1: Age and gender of respondents

Gender/Age	Male	Female	Total
55-65	6	6	12
66-75	14	3	17
76 and above	3	0	3
Total	23	9	32

Table 2: Age and gender of respondents

Age/Gender	55-65		66-75		76 and above		Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Primary or below	3	1	7	1	2	0	14
Secondary	2	4	2	2	0	0	10
'A' Levels or above	1	1	5	0	1	0	8
Total	6	6	14	3	3	0	32

Gender

A number of themes suggest themselves for further investigation, but we want to concentrate on just four. The first of these relates to the role of gender. None of our female respondents solely read newspapers in the library. Only one used the senior citizen room and of course the number of female respondents are much less than males. These disparities suggest that gender is an important component in understanding the reading and library use of Chinese educated elderly Singaporeans. Teo (1997a) points to the notion that the kind and frequency of participation in leisure activities is connected with gender. She makes use of the insights of feminist geography to argue that one determinant of leisure activity is unequal allocation of public and private space according to gender. Whereas women are normally associated with the private space of the home, men are largely linked to public space. In our own study this notion of space is invoked by several respondents when asked to explain why more males come to read in the library. One woman explained their own lack of use in the following manner: "to be honest, most of the times

I see more men. Very few women. So we also dare not go and sit. It is not very convenient. Right? Men on my right and left. I am the only women to take a seat. Isn't that awkward? I have never gone in" (R24F). Another suggested that the library deal with the problem by splitting the room in two because "It is quite awkward for a woman to go in there and sit there. You get men directly opposite you and next to you on both sides. It can be uncomfortable" (R27F). This notion of a de facto division of space between males and females was also shared by several of the male respondents when they were asked why women didn't seem to frequent these places as much as men. One man described his own situation where the house was ceded to his wife and he looked for places to go outside: "Men like us who are old cannot stay at home all day. If we stay at home already, there is bound to be quarrels. Have to go out ... Most men have always been working outside" (R18M). Another explained: "You think about women, stay at home, cook, do house work. Men go out more often. Women, can you all go out alone? Men, we all can go out alone. Men can go out till 2AM in the morning. But women, no" (R4M).

Teo (1997a) found that when elderly women did participate in public leisure activities they did so as part of a family group and not as individuals. Given the nature of the reading experience as currently constructed in the library (solitary, quiet, individual, and serious) this propensity acts to limit the engagement of elderly women as such engagement would require the consent of the entire group. As mentioned previously, none of the women read newspapers in the library whereas many of the men did. The notion of public space as essentially a male domain requiring the protection or security of a group for female access helps to explain this finding. But whereas males and females acknowledged a division of space, the use of groups to allow female participation in that space was not acknowledged. Instead both men and women explained the group behaviour as a natural phenomenon – women were said to prefer "to gather and talk together in a group" (R26M) or, as another respondent put it, to engage in "busybody stuff like chitchat" (R1F).

But far above the notion of public space as a barrier for women is the importance the respondents put on another finding of Teo's study (1997a), namely, the continuation of the physical and social reproductive work of their youth to another generation of children. The interference of housework and childcare in the leisure lives of women is a pronounced theme in our study, mentioned by both males and females as a reason for the lack of women in the library. R1F description of her daily routine is suggestive of the situation facing many elderly women in Singapore: "I live with my own family but I have three daughters. Every day I have to go to the three houses and take care of their children. So I get to read only at [her own] home ... after housework is done, then I read ... Sometimes I'm so tired, I fall asleep" (R1F).

The blurring of the social/physical reproductive tasks and leisure in the case of elderly Singaporeans is certainly not a natural phenomenon, nor an entirely social or cultural one. It is also likely the result of the indirect product of policy. The Singaporean government has encouraged what it calls Confucian values as a replacement for a fully fledged social welfare system. Under this system, children are legally obliged to provide financially for their elderly parents in order to fulfill their filial responsibilities (Lee, 1986). This in turn, puts some pressure on the elderly to contribute as well. For elderly women this likely takes the form of responsibilities they used to have in their own household and it can act as an impediment to reading.

Class

One of the more interesting responses given by the respondents was the association of the senior citizens room of the library as a place of respite for those elderly individuals lacking air conditioning at home. Given Singapore's climate and its overall level of affluence, one would not have expected such a response and it hints at the role of class in library use by the elderly.

Although Singapore is by any standard one of the wealthier countries in the world, it has not achieved a classless society. It is, however, or at least has been, a society dominated by the middle class. Tan, in a 2001 study of social stratification in Singapore using income, education and housing ownership as indicators of middle class status, suggests that between two-thirds and three-fourths of the population fall into that category (11-12). However, the last few decades have seen rising income inequalities. The country saw its share of income as wages falling from forty-seven percent in 2001 to forty-one percent in 2006, while the Gini coefficient, a widely used measure of economic inequality, has risen from .43 in 1990 to .52 in 2005. Furthermore, the disposable income ratio between the top and bottom twenty percent of the population has risen from a 1990 value of 11.4 to a 2000 value of 20.9 (Asher & Nandy 2008).

A complacent view of class in Singapore must also be tempered by the acknowledgment that poverty or relative deprivation falls unevenly on any population. In Singapore, the elderly bear much of this load. William Lee notes that a 1991 government survey found that a little under one third of men over fifty-five had no savings while the figure for women was much higher, standing at 73.5 percent of the total (Lee 1999). Asher and Nandy (2008) also show that the vulnerability of the elderly in Singapore to poverty is not a passing trend, but likely to persist in the future. They argue that the average CPF (Central Provident Fund, a compulsory savings scheme overseen by the government) level held by Singaporeans today (\$40,598 in 2006), is not enough to secure an adequate retirement income.

The respondents of our study revealed the existence of class divisions in a number of ways other than the use of air-conditioning of the senior citizens room. But the use of this room was definitely considered as conveying an image of low status. R15M was brutal in his assessment, describing such users as people "who have nowhere to go, nothing to do ... waiting to die. Useless people, have nothing to do after eating" (R15M). R15M's equation of low status to those with "nowhere to go" was elaborated on by another respondent who did indeed cite high transport costs as the reason why the library was resorted to by numbers of the elderly: "I have no occupation. I have no way out. I cannot simply take the bus anywhere. Even more expensive than meals. For two dollars you can get a filling meal. To ride the bus a few times will cost you two or three dollars ... Just can hide in one place. Library, not hot and can read the newspapers!" (26M). In fact, the library as a whole was viewed as a refuge for the financially hampered elderly: "Most of them who come out are those who do not have money ... It is not possible for them to buy things for the home ... The rich ones got. They have all their things at home ..." (R18M).

Ageism

As well as being a place for the relatively poor, the senior citizens room was also associated in the minds of the respondents with sleeping. Sleeping was roundly condemned, but to one respondent at least it seemed a universal trait of the Chinese elderly in Singapore: “We Chinese are like that ... we just sleep wherever we go” (R10M). This same respondent compared this state of affairs unfavourably to Australia whose seniors apparently “are not like that, not the least like that” (R10M). R10M comparison brings to the fore issues of ageism in Singapore. Although it has not been the subject of much study there is a feeling that the elderly are not as productive as younger people and hence less attractive to employers (Heok 1994; Teo 1997b). Certainly the state, in an effort to encourage more elderly people to work, has seen a need to give employers incentive to do so, including sponsoring retraining programs, lowering CPF contributions and salary scales, as well as allowing employers to substitute bonuses for annual increments. However, there is some doubt about whether these policies are enough to overcome the ageism that is at the root of employers’ distaste for hiring the elderly. In 1999, for example, only 14.6 of men above 65 were employed and only four percent of the women (Teo et. al. 2006, 49).

Our respondents exhibited clear signs of ageism when asked about the utility or even desirability of reading programmes for the elderly. Most did not believe that the programs were necessary or that they would produce useful results. Two principal reasons were given: the elderly had no ability and they had no interest. The latter will be discussed in the next section, the former is evidence of ageism within the mindset of the elderly themselves. R1F, for example, had this to say about the potential establishment of a reading class: “They are not like small children, say one sentence, can repeat after you. For the old people, read for one hour, it gives them an “impression” then the next hour they would have forgotten it. So, no use” (R1F). R14M believed the same, commenting that “really, this is very difficult. When people are old, it is difficult to follow. They are numbed already. They do not think of anything else. They just want to follow and be with their old friends. Most are like that. They do not really read. Just walk up and down, look at people and play chess” (R14M).

In the review of the literature, we noted that the prevailing view among those who study the elderly and their needs is that in the case of reading the problems the elderly face are not so much physical or mental, but social. If this view is correct in the Singaporean context it has yet to reach the ears of many of our elderly respondents.

Instrumental view of reading

Our respondents not only reasoned that the elderly would not benefit from reading programmes due to a lack of ability, but also a lack of interest. To a certain extent this is natural. Reading novels or history or popular science is not appealing to everyone. However, the attitudes of many of the respondents suggest a deeper problem; namely, an overly instrumental view of what reading is for. Consider R8M who told the interviewer that: “When they [the elderly] read, they see the book there, but the book there ... the image in the mind is money. That is the only thing” (R8M). R15M noted that “In reading there is a problem of money. No money to earn, I have no interest” (R15M). Similarly, R13F believed that the view of many of the elderly was that “I have eaten until today, we are so old, why would I want to read and study?” (R13F). And R5M ridiculed the notion of a reading programme in these terms: “you ask me to go study, take the

hat, ohhh, take a photo, happy or not? I got a certificate, come out for what? I go there, you want to give me ... I got a certificate, I want to work, you give me or not?" (R5M).

What these respondents and the many others who shared their views have in common is a notion of reading that is (too) closely tied to skills development, employment, and ultimately, the making of money. What is missing is, in the words of one unique respondent: "the joy of reading" (R4M). But this is not surprising. Our respondents grew up at a time when Singapore was a much poorer place and opportunities for advancement hard to come by for most. And for much of their working lives they have been exposed to a powerfully propagated ideology that views education as the means to an end. Sharpe and Gopinathan (2002) characterize the period from independence to the end of the 1980s as the "efficiency-driven" phase of Singapore's education history. The state's concern during this time was to mould a coherent nation out of disparate ethnic groups and to provide its citizens with basic skills and attitudes needed to be attractive to foreign investors fleeing higher wage costs in North America, Europe, and Japan. Hence, educational policy at the time was not about developing "a joy of reading" among students but aimed at creating an efficient, pliable labour force and involved participation in a hierarchical, centralized, competitive, and what must have been a generally unforgiving institutional culture.

Interestingly, this finding differs from earlier studies done in a Western context. Both Wolf (1977) and Rig & Kazemal (1983) suggested that the elderly valued literacy not for instrumental or functional ends, but as a means of social communication with their peers. On the other hand, our finding supports Picton & Yuan (1998) who noted the one of the differences between Chinese and Australian elderly learners was the instrumental motivation of many of the latter.

Summing Up and Moving On

Before discussing the implications of these findings, we want to stress that our study only examined one branch library. Hence the results are not generalizable for the entire country. However, it would be equally wrong-headed to argue that the themes that so affected the elderly at Toa Payoh are non-existent in other regions of Singapore. There are likely to be similar kinds of individuals at any particular library branch, although the proportion of the total population they represent may vary significantly.

We have looked at four themes that have been developed from a reading of the responses made by the elderly to our questions about their reading and library habits. Each of these themes (gender, class, ageism, and instrumentalism) appear to powerfully condition the reading of the elderly and their use of library facilities. Each provides challenges for librarians striving to serve their communities, but are they challenges worth taking on? If we listen to the elderly themselves, the answer might be no. They believe that conditions are adequate and that they can find their own way. And perhaps they might, but the elderly themselves speak of a great waste of human potential that the current situation perpetuates, if it does not directly create, when they refer to themselves or others as reading because they have "nothing much to do" (R19M) or not as a leisure activity but "just to kill time" (R26M). Surely at least some effort should be made to reach out to the elderly to enrich their reading experiences at this, the twilight of their lives. Doing so would involve re-constructing what it means for the elderly to read. To deal with issues

of gender, library spaces for the elderly should be segregated while the creation of reading clubs or programmes that either bring together a number of elderly women or cater in different ways for a broad spectrum of the families of elderly women may accommodate the current social situation of these women better. In the United States, the development of library cafes form part of an approach that aims to reach out to the elderly population by encouraging social interaction (Dow Schull, 2005). Other libraries have developed inter-generational programs that pair the elderly with children or teens (Long, 2005). To deal with issues of class (or at least the immobility that is associated with poverty), the library needs to bring books to the elderly rather than waiting for them to arrive at the library. An added benefit of such a scheme would be the ability to accommodate the elderly's sense of place. Teo (1997b) notes that the elderly "often desire to draw their own geographies" as part of a daily pattern of activity that helps them not only navigate space, but participate in its social life. Interestingly, this need to go to the elderly is also a theme in United States discussions of how to cater to the "baby boomer" generation. In one focus group study, bookmobile service was a common request and while that library system found it too expensive to implement they did implement a book delivery program in conjunction with the social service organization, Meals on Wheels as well as a system of satellite libraries at places such as YWCA, community and health centres (Nevill, 2004). Finally, to deal with ageism and the instrumental view of reading, an effort needs to be made to gauge better the kinds of reading materials that would appeal to the elderly. An ideal reading environment for lower-educated senior citizens would provide reading materials that they can appreciate. Comics may be a solution here, having always been associated with entertainment. Using them to encourage and develop reading skills will not recreate the stress and pressure that many of the elderly likely associated with reading during their school years. This should make reading more appealing. And if martial arts comics are used, a tradition in popular Chinese culture, the interest would be greater. Many of the elderly remembered these comics from their childhood.

Conclusion

This article summarizes the results of a study of reading and library use conducted with thirty-two Singaporean Chinese over the age of fifty-five at one public library branch. As well as collecting demographic data such as age, education level, and reading history of the respondents, the study uncovered several themes that appear to condition the reading and use of the library by many of the elderly. These include gender concerns, class divisions, internalized ageism, and an ingrained instrumental view of reading. In terms of gender, the study found that gendered perceptions of space may preclude many elderly women from using the library's facilities more often, as does a more indistinct line between leisure and continuing family responsibilities. While most Singaporeans are middle class, at least some of the elderly are experiencing relative levels of poverty. The study found that class distinctions were reflected in attitudes towards the senior citizen's room in the library whose users were associated with several negative attributes and in lack of transport capabilities which meant the use of the library as a place of refuge from the environment and as simply "somewhere to go". Many of the respondents suffered from an internalized view of the elderly as less productive, intelligent and capable of learning than younger people. This was heavily reflected in their views on the desirability and usefulness of implementing reading programmes at the library for them. And finally, the study found there was an overly instrumental view of reading on the part of the elderly which tended to associate it

with skills, employment, and earning an income. Such a view precluded other more artistic or leisurely uses of reading that may be of use to the elderly at this stage of their lives. Several suggestions for the were given in order to address these four themes and help make the library a more useful institution for the elderly in Singapore.

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Author biographies

Brendan Luyt is an Assistant Professor at the School of Communication & Information, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. His research interests focus broadly on the social and policy landscape of information access including the history of information institutions, Wikipedia as a social phenomenon, issues in scholarly information and communication and library user groups such as the elderly and children.

Ho Swee Ann was a MSc in Information Studies student from 2008 to 2009. She joined the National University of Singapore Libraries system upon graduation. Her research interests include library services for the elderly and other marginalized groups.