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The National Library of Singapore: creating a sense of community

Introduction

The opening of the National Library building in 1960 was supposed to herald a new beginning for library services in the country as well as being a concrete sign of approaching nation-hood. This was not to be. Instead criticism of the building was immediately forthcoming: "a jumble of architectural sections" (Straits Times, 1960) claimed one critic while another observed that the "building appears massive, clumsy and heavy" (Singapore Free Press, 1960). Upon opening, the library was further criticized for its lack of cleanliness and air conditioning (National Library Board, 1967; National Library of Singapore, 1967). Fast-tracking forty years who would have expected to see this uninspiring building the focus of a vocal campaign to save it from destruction? But when the government decided that it needed to build a highway and scheduled the old library for demolition (Straits Times, 1999d), the normally quiet citizens of the city-state protested. Many Singaporeans wrote to the local newspapers, pleading with the government to reconsider the decision. One local architect, Tay Kheng Soon, changed his view from demolition to preservation of the building and provided an alternative design after he became aware of the strong feeling the building had for many Singaporeans (Straits Times, 2000a). Ho Weng Hin and Tan Kar Lin wrote to the local newspaper, suggesting an above-ground tunnel to release the traffic tension at the area, because they believed that

"fondness for a place has greater ramifications of feeling deeply for our personal, social and consequently, our national identity.....Singaporeans have come to accept and even treasure the National Library's existence. The building has matured with generations of Singaporeans. It has assimilated into its physical surroundings and has become a place which holds precious memories"(Straits Times, 1999a).

But officially at least, the attitude towards the library crystalized towards the view of its earlier architectural critics. The Preservation of Monuments Board declared it a building not possessing

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great architectural merit, an argument used by the government to justify the demolition of the building in 2000 (Straits Times, 1999c; Straits Times, 2000b).

If the National Library building was not considered beautiful according to aesthetic criteria, what was its charm that won the hearts and minds of so many Singaporeans? How can we understand this seemingly puzzling phenomenon? An examination via the lens of community building can provide a tentative answer.

So far there has been little research on the library's role in a community. The research that has been done shows that some libraries fail to serve the needs of the communities while others succeed in serving their communities by playing diverse roles. Situating public library services in the context of major social issues, John Vincent (2009) reviewed the development of public library services for black and minority ethnic communities for the period of forty years from 1969 to 2009 in the U.K. and pointed out the failure of public libraries to serve diverse communities. Accentuating the distinctive feature of multiculturalism in South Africa, A. Rodrigues (2006) conducted research on the public libraries in South Africa, pointed out that there was lack of recognition of the role of the public libraries played in serving diverse multicultural communities, and offered some suggestions for improvement. Through a study of four public libraries in the U.S. Midwest from 1876 to 1956, Wayne A. Wiegand (2011) showed that they facilitated social harmony in local communities by providing a place where people could learn acceptable behavior and read for life. Working within the intersection between LIS and urban geography, Ajit K. Pyati & Ahmad M. Kamal (2012) conducted a study on community libraries in Bangalore's poor neighborhood to show how libraries, as community space, could play a role in helping the marginalized communities.

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In their review of the historical development of the concept of space and place, Gloria J. Leckie and John E. Buschman highlighted the relevance of the scholarly discussion of space and place to library research (Leckie and Buschman, 2007). They advocated that understanding the library as a place can be achieved by applying various theoretical frameworks espoused by scholars from diverse disciplines (Leckie and Buschman, 2007). In scholarly discussions (especially in the social sciences), very often the notion of space and place is closely related to community (Leckie and Buschman, 2007). Linking the conceptions of space/place with community, Leckie and Busckman suggested that the idea that "a community can form around a place, can create a place and/or have strong ties to a place" (p.13) was useful in a discussion of libraries (Leckie and Buschman, 2007).

Dissatisfied with previous studies on sense of community, David W. McMillan and David M. Chavis, from the perspective of community psychology, proposed a definition and theory of sense of community (McMillan and Chavis, 1986). Their theory is pertinent to the library context as it helps to explain the relationship between the library and the community it serves. So far, McMillan and Chavis' theory has not aroused much interest from LIS researchers except for Julia A. Hersberger, Lou Sua, and Adam L. Murray's (2007) work. Using McMillan and Chavis' (1986) theory of sense of community, these authors demonstrated the historical roles the Greensboro Carnegie Negro Library played in the African American community from 1904 to 1964 (Hersberger et al., 2007). By meeting the myriad needs of members of the African American Community, Greensboro Carnegie Negro Library was more than a place because it "defined the community" (p.97) and became "the fruit and root of the community"(p.97).

Here we present a study of the National Library of Singapore via the lens of a "sense of community". Our study investigates the role of the National Library of Singapore in the life of

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Singaporeans. Through this study, we hope to show that, as a cultural institution, the library is more than its physical building, resources and services, that the library has played a pivotal role in the life of the users with its diverse resources and services fostering a sense of community.

Method and theoretical framework

Our research is a historical study of the National Library of Singapore. In his philosophy of history, Robin George Collingwood (1994) remarked that "anything is evidence which enables you to answer your question – the question you are asking now" (p.281). The general principle on source selection in this study follows Collingwood's (1994) principle, that is, any source that will help us answer our research question should be used. Diverse sources have been used in current study, for example, the letters written by the directors of the library and the ministers of the Singapore Government, the minutes of meetings of the National Library Board of Singapore, the annual report of the library, the online version of the annual report of the People's Association, statistics available on the website of the Department of Statistics Singapore, local newspapers (such as *Straits Times*, *Malayan Saturday Post*, and *Singapore Free Press*, website contents from the People's Association website, and so on.

One of the key resources we have relied on is a collection of letters that the library received from patrons expressing their feelings about the old library. Published by the National Library Board in 2004, *Moments in time: memories of the National Library* (*Moments in time: memories of the National Library*, 2004), the volume is an invaluable document for researchers trying to understand the role the library played in the lives of Singaporeans. It is important to note that we are not suggesting that the book constitutes a representative sample of Singaporean opinion about the library. Not all Singaporeans may have cared deeply enough about the library to write a letter, but that is not the point here. What *Moments in time* demonstrates is the existence of a

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sizeable number of people for whom the library played an important role in their lives. It is the nature of this community that provides the focus for this article.

The theoretical framework employed to analyze the role of the National Library of Singapore is McMillan and Chavis' (1986) theory of a sense of community. Hersberger, Sua and Murray's (2007) work revealed the usefulness of this theory. We believe that it is an interesting theoretical framework that deserves more attention from the LIS community and can be adopted in more related research work across cultures to study the relationship between the library and its community. Inspired by Hersberger, Sua and Murray's (2007) work, we would like to explore how McMillan and Chavis's (1986) theory can be used in another cultural context, such as Singapore, an Asian city state, formerly a key outpost of the British Empire.

McMillan and Chavis (1986) define a sense of community as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (p.9). According to McMillan and Chavis, a sense of community consists of four elements, namely, membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection (McMillan and Chavis, 1986). In their theory, membership is a feeling of belonging as a result of investing part of oneself in a community (McMillan and Chavis, 1986). Membership implies boundaries; some people will be included while others will be excluded (McMillan and Chavis, 1986). Boundaries are important psychologically as they provide emotional safety so that the feelings and needs of members will be expressed and intimacy among members developed (McMillan and Chavis, 1986). According to McMillan and Chavis (1986), influence is "a sense of mattering, of making a difference to a group and of the group mattering to its members" (p.9). Influence is considered by McMillan and Chavis to be bidirectional, which means that on the one hand the member will

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influence the community directly or indirectly; on the other, the member will be influenced by the community (McMillan and Chavis, 1986). For McMillan and Chavis (1986), integration and fulfillment of needs in the context of community building is "the feeling that members' needs will be met by the resources received through their membership in the group"(p.9). People are attracted to a community that can meet their needs (McMillan and Chavis, 1986). The better the community meets the needs of its members, the stronger sense of community the members will have (McMillan and Chavis, 1986). Shared emotional connection, in McMillan and Chavis' (1986) theory, is the "commitment and belief that members have shared and will share history, common places, time together, and similar experiences. This is the feeling one sees in farmers' faces as they talk about their home place, their land, and their families"(p.9). Contact, quality of interaction, investment and spiritual bonds are some elements suggested by McMillan and Chavis (1986) that play important roles in creating shared emotional connections.

All four elements of sense of community develop as a result of certain actions. An action can produce more than one type of feeling depending on which angle we want to focus. When a member, say A, plays a role in a community, there is a possibility that A's one action can produce three types of feeling: 1) A's feeling of influence because of A's own action; 2) a feeling in other members of the community of integration and need fulfillment because of the impact of A's action; and 3) A's feeling of shared emotional connection because A invests part of himself or herself in the community via his or her action. Because of the possibility of one action in producing more than one type of feeling, there will be situations in our article that some of our materials will be discussed in more than one section or the same materials under one section can be used in another section. For example, the material regarding Fong Sip Chee's involvement in the Committee on service in the Chinese language will be used in both the section dealing with influence and the section discussing integration and fulfillment of needs. On the one hand, Fong had a feeling of influence because of his involvement in the Committee on

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service in the Chinese language; on the other, other members of the same community had a feeling of integration and fulfillment of needs because their needs for Chinese language collection were met as a result of his contribution to the success of building up that collection. The material of Edmond Ng can be used in either the section discussing influence or the section dealing with shared emotional connection. In this article, we use the story of Edmond Ng in the section under shared emotional connection because high quality interactions experienced by Edmond Ng during his visit to the library played an important role in creating his strong emotional bonding towards the library.

But before taking up the task of investigating the role of the library via employment of McMillan and Chavis's (1986) framework, we need to understand a little about the post-war Singapore context into which the National Library was born.

Awakening Singapore

Occupied by the Japanese in 1941, the ending of World War Two four years later did not bring tranquility to Singapore. Facing U.S. criticism and the aroused political awareness of the local colonial populace, the British colonial authorities took steps to pave the way for self-government amidst riots and unrest (Turnbull, 2009). Singapore was separated from the Federation of Malaysia in 1946 and obtained city status in 1951 (Turnbull, 2009). Following the passage of the State of Singapore Act by the British Parliament in 1958, an election was scheduled to take place in 1959 so as to bring a new constitution into force (Turnbull, 2009). Although the People's Action Party (PAP), established in October 1955 with Lee Kuan Yew as secretary-general, was a relatively new comer to the Singapore political scene, it won the May 1959 general election, becoming the first elected government in the new State of Singapore (Turnbull, 2009). After a brief merger with Malaysia, Singapore declared independence on August 9, 1965

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(Turnbull, 2009). Throughout the time, one of the primary aims in the minds of PAP leaders was to imbue the local multi-racial multi-lingual populace with the spirit of belonging to a nation (Turnbull, 2009). Given the history of the newly created island-state, this did not appear an easy task.

When Stamford Raffles, generally seen as Singapore's founding father, arrived at the island on January 28, 1819, the local population was only around 150, consisting of mainly Malays and Chinese (Saw, 2007). In subsequent years, the opportunity for making money, or at least a living, attracted many immigrants, mostly from China and to a lesser extent India (Saw, 2007). For most of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, such a mixed ethnic population was not viewed as a problem for the colonial government. In 1949 the government (as quoted in (Turnbull, 2009)) commented that "There are no social problems of race or cultural relations of any magnitude. All races live and work harmoniously together"(p.291). This sense of security was shattered with the Hertogh riots in 1950¹ and the 1964 race riots², which exposed the

¹ The Hertogh riots were initially a custody battle between Maria Huberdina Bertha Hertogh's (or Nadra as she was known to Muslims) Eurasian parents and her adoptive Malay family. Maria was raised as a Muslim by Che Aminah binte Mohamed (Maria's foster mother) and was 13 years old in 1950. The custody battle was covered by intensive media reports and was used by Muslim activists as an opportunity to weaken the colonial government's political position. The Judge's decision on the dismissal of Che Aminah's appeal with custody given to Maria's biological parents and the invalidity of Maria's marriage to Mansoor Adabi ignited huge riots between the Malay and Indian Muslim community on one side and the European and Eurasian community on the other, starting on Dec 11, 1950. Over three days, 18 people were killed and 173 people were injured. The inability or weakness of the colonial government in dealing with the Singapore Muslims' attitude towards the colonial government was exposed in the Hertogh riots. In the aftermath, the colonial government took various strategies, including proscription, surveillance, self-criticism, reconciliation and reform, to address the issues. (Aljunied, S. M. K. (2009), *Colonialism, violence and Muslims in Southeast Asia: the Maria Hertogh controversy and its aftermath*, Routledge, London, Clutterbuck, R. (1985), *Conflict and violence in Singapore and Malaysia 1945 - 1983*, Graham Brash Ltd, Singapore, Hughes, T. E. (1982), *Tangled worlds: the story of Maria Hertogh*, The Institute of Southeast Asia Studies, Singapore, Kwa, C. G., Heng, D. and Tan, T. Y. (2009), *Singapore: a 700-year history from early emporium to world city* The National Archives of Singapore, Singapore.)

² The 1964 race riots, the worst racial riots in post-war Singapore, were the accumulation of the dissatisfaction or resentment of many in the Malay community who realized that no special privilege would be given to them in Singapore's merger with the Federation of Malaysia. Two five day riots broke out between the Malay community

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fragility of racial harmony. The issue of nationalism versus ethnicism loomed large from that point onwards. National cohesion based on a multiracial, multilingual secular society was an important issue to the PAP government, as Lee Kuan Yew's (Turnbull, 2009) address to the Parliament in 1965 makes clear: "We have a vested interest in multi-racialism and a secular state, for the antithesis of multi-racialism and the antithesis of secularism hold perils of enormous magnitude"(p.304). But the Singapore case was a difficult one. Singapore could not use the method of many new countries to carry out nation building, namely the promotion of the culture of an indigenous majority, because it would inevitably led to Chinese dominance at the expense of the other groups (Turnbull, 2009). Furthermore, as an immigrant society, much of the population, especially the Chinese, had a "sojourning mentality with primary loyalty to their respective ancestral lands"(Liu and Wong, 2004)(p.1) thus creating added problems of multiple allegiances and loyalties. The approach that the Singaporean government adopted to nation building was to recognize cultural diversity on the one hand, but to create a distinct Singaporean identity on the other, or as in the Minister for Foreign Affairs Sinnathamby Rajaratnam's (Turnbull, 2009) words to create "a Singaporean of a unique kind..... a man rooted in the cultures of four great civilizations but not belonging exclusively to any of them."(p.304). How did "a Singaporean of a unique kind" come into being? In the following sections, we will argue that the National Library of Singapore played an important role in fostering a sense of community in Singapore, creating "a Singaporean of a unique kind".

The role of the National Library of Singapore

In the following sections, we use McMillan and Chavis's (1986) analytical framework to delineate the role of the National Library of Singapore in nation building.

and Chinese community starting from July 21, 1964 and September 2, 1964 respectively, resulting in 34 deaths and 563 injured. (Clutterbuck, R. (1985), *Conflict and violence in Singapore and Malaysia 1945 - 1983*, Graham Brash Ltd, Singapore, Kwa, C. G., Heng, D. and Tan, T. Y. (2009), *Singapore: a 700-year history from early emporium to world city* The National Archives of Singapore, Singapore.)

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Membership

The National Library of Singapore, it can be argued, helped to create a sense of membership in the early days of Singapore independence especially when we think about the nature of the library before those days.

Although the library in the 19th century was open to the general public, it was a public library in name only because its collection of mostly English language materials limited its appeal to those belonging to the English educated upper social strata of Singapore, effectively excluding the majority of the population, who did not read English to any great extent. The issue of race and class prejudice (Luyt, 2012) acted as an additional brake to the creation of a wide membership. Under such circumstances, the community that the library served during colonial period was extremely small (Luyt, 2008; Luyt, 2009b). Despite the advocacy of a few liberal minded people, the library continued to be an exclusive place well into the 20th century (Luyt, 2012). In his 1940 letter to the Library Committee, Frederick Nutter Chasen (the director of the Raffles Library and Museum) pointed out that:

"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'³ 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 the first class subscribers using the magazine rooms is rapidly declining. One now rarely see a European woman in these rooms and there is something to be said from their point of view from some of our 'thirds' are toughish and a

³ Tuan besar refers to "European boss in colonial Malaysia" (Merriam Webster. (2011) "*Tuan besar*", available at: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tuan%20besar>. (accessed 8 May 2013))

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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." (Chasen, 1940).

The restricted opening hours that did not consider the life style of the average Singaporean further deterred the majority of the population from using the library. As early as the 1920s, some people already voiced their dissatisfaction through the local newspapers regarding the inconvenience of the opening hours of the library. For example, one author commented that "Raffles Library, which is undoubtedly one of the finest in the Far East, is virtually closed to many Singapore residents, solely because it shuts its doors during those hours when many thousands would like to avail of it. The average employee in Singapore finds time hanging idle on his hands during the evening....."(Malayan Saturday Post, 1927), but there was not enough pressure for change to be forthcoming.

As late as 1947, the number of subscribers of the library was only 3,297 (Tweedie, 1949) while the local population in the same year was 938,144 (Saw, 2007), which means that only 0.35 percent of the local populace were members of the library. What changed all this was the determination of Lee Kong Chian (a local multi-millionaire) to launch Singapore's first free public library (Seet, 1983). He donated \$375,000 for the library in 1953 with the condition that it should be free and should provide books in Chinese and other Asian languages together with English (Seet, 1983; Straits Times, 1957). The change to a free library was accompanied by a change in name. The Raffles Library became the Raffles National Library in 1958 and later the National Library of Singapore in 1960 (Seet, 1983). The new library was immediately successful in raising the number of members (see Table 1). In fact, overwhelmed by the enthusiasm of the public, the new library had to use a \$5 deposit as a bar to slow down the speed of increase in library membership, fearing that a lack of stock and qualified staff would create a bad impression (National Library Board, 1964).

Table 1 National Library of Singapore membership 1957-2001

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Year	1957	1961	1981	2001
Membership	8,628	56,048	462,399	1,962,000
Annual percentage growth rate	514.54%			
Total population*	1,445,929	1,702,400	2,532,800	4,138,000
Percentage of total population with library membership	0.60%	3.29%	18.26%	47.41%

*Total population refers to Singapore residence (including Singapore citizens and permanent residence) and non-residence.

(Department of Statistics Singapore, 2012a; Department of Statistics Singapore, 2012b; Saw, 2007; Seet, 1983)

The Raffles National Library and the National Library of Singapore aimed to serve the whole of Singapore. The previous narrowly constructed exclusive community serving a small number of upper strata people during the old colonial days was to be transformed into an inclusive community at least in theory catering for the needs of the whole population of Singapore. In the old colonial days the library made many feel unwelcome because of its practices which favoured the privileged few, such as its major collection being in English, issues of race and class prejudice, as well as restricted opening hours, as mentioned earlier. With the enactment of National Library Ordinance of 1957, a new "club" became available to potentially the entire population of Singapore. Given its stated aim to cater for a multi-racial Singapore and to offer a universal service, it would hold out to the average Singaporean the opportunity of belonging to a new community, a national community. Looking back at the role the library played in their lives, some of library users reveal this sense of community. Julia Lau (2004) (Analyst) called the library a "refuge from home"(p.28) as she remarked "I have been to many libraries since, but none have welcomed me as warmly or opened up so many new vistas to me"(p.28). Cyril Wong (2004) (Poet) considered the library as his other parent because, in his words, "My parents seldom afforded me that relief.....The library was the first place where I learnt that I was not alone in being condemned for the choices I made in my life"(p.32). The entitlement of membership and a feeling of belongingness created a feeling of emotional security among the local multilingual, multiracial populace as they used the neutral nature of the library to meet and

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interact with each other. As time went by, more and more of Singapore's population joined the new community.

Influence

Over the years, the bidirectional nature of influence can be detected in the community of the National Library of Singapore. Many individuals or organizations were actively involved in the transformation of the National Library of Singapore. Equally important, many individuals were deeply influenced by the National Library of Singapore.

One important transformer of the library was Lee Kong Chian. As mentioned previously, the library was virtually inaccessible to the majority of Singaporeans prior to the 1950s. Lee Kong Chian's donation of \$375,000 toward the construction of a new library with the condition that it should be free and collect equally in Asian languages (Chinese, Malay and Tamil) alongside English (Seet, 1983; Straits Times, 1957) had a profound influence on its development. It pushed the library into a new direction of catering its collections and services for the needs of the local populace, feeling the pulse of the majority instead of the minority, as well as situating itself in the life of the local people.

Hedwig Anuar was another person who was very influential in shaping the National Library of Singapore. Anuar was director of the library on secondment from the University of Malaya from 1960 to 1961, assistant director from 1962 to 1964, and director from 1965 to 1988 (*Who's who in Singapore*, 2000; Seet, 1983). To develop awareness of the collections and services among the local populace during the early years after the institution became a free public library, Mrs. Anuar worked with local media. For example, "Our Library", a weekly magazine programme for

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Radio Singapore during September and November 1960, was produced to broadcast information about the collections and happenings in the library (Seet, 1983). In December 1960, short documentaries called "Off the shelf" were shown at local cinemas to promote the mobile library service (Seet, 1983). To encourage more young people between fifteen and twenty to become frequent users of the library, Mrs. Anuar introduced Young Adult Service in April 1966, targeting both young people at school and young people out of school (Anuar, 1967). The new service aroused great enthusiasm from the young people, which could be seen from the fact that new registrations were added at the rate of 400 or more each month and that half to three quarters of the Young People's collection shelves were always empty (Anuar, 1967). Under her leadership, the National Library of Singapore grew from one library to nine libraries and the membership increased from 43,000 to 330,000 (Straits Times, 1988).

But heroic individuals were not the only ones to influence the library. To help tackle the issue of collection development, various committees were set up over the years. For example, the Committee on Service in the Chinese Language was set up and its Chairman, Mr. Fong Sip Chee, was invited to the National Library Board meeting on Jan 2, 1965 to present his views and recommendations (National Library Board, 1965). In 1967 an Advisory Committee on Undesirable Publications, whose members included the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Culture, librarians of the University of Singapore, Nanyang University and Director of the National Library of Singapore, was formed to review the issue of undesirable publications (National Library Board, 1967). Many local organizations and individuals actively donated books to help the National Library of Singapore build up its collections. For example, the Chinese Booksellers Association donated 1,500 books in 1960 (Seet, 1983). The library received donations of books on the topic of careers from the Singapore Rotary Club in 1963 (Anuar, 1967). In fulfillment of the will of her son, Dato Loke Kan Tho (the first Chairman of the National Library Board from 1960 to 1963), Mrs. Loke Yew donated the valuable Gibson-Hill

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collection with its subject focus on history, art, archaeology, zoology and ornithology to the National Library of Singapore in 1965 (Seet, 1983; Seet, 2005). Subject specialists from the University of Singapore, the Singapore Polytechnic and the Teachers' training college were actively involved in helping the National Library of Singapore in the adult collection building process (National Library of Singapore, 1966). With these collective efforts, an impressively large collection was built up by the National Library in a period of less than 50 years as shown in Table 2:

Table 2 National Library of Singapore collections 1958-2001

Year	1958	1961	1981	2001
Total collection	150,000	187,751	1,504,528	6,861,100

(Department of Statistics Singapore, 2012a; Seet, 1983)

Some individuals influenced the library indirectly. Trainee teachers from the Teachers' Training College as well as secondary students became voluntary storytellers (National Library of Singapore, 1968; National Library of Singapore, 1969). Some individuals were involved in other services for the library. For example, Toh Chew Seng, a teacher, taught a Chinese literature writing class for young people (Toh, 2004). In a way, these individuals helped to shape the public image of the library, building a positive public relationship between the library and the community that it served.

To many Singaporeans, the National Library was a place that nurtured their interest in reading. To Ngian Lek Choh (Deputy Chief Executive, National Library Board), the National Library was a fun place in her childhood memory. During her trip to the library with her siblings under the guidance of her older brother aged 13 or 14 years, she borrowed and read hundreds of books (Ngian, 2004b). To Stella Kon (Writer), she entered a world of "an exhaustible source of books

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full of wonderful stories”(p.17) after she was dropped off by her parents at the library for one to two hours in the 1950s (Kon, 2004).

With its large collection and qualified library staff, the National Library of Singapore helped Singaporeans with their study and research. After many years, Gary Lim (Teacher) could still vividly recall his experience in using the library resources for his study in his younger years (Lim, 2004a). Unable to buy books for his secondary school study, Kelvin Lee (Lawyer) used the abundant reference books inside the library for his study, as a result, he won a national secondary school science quiz and achieved good marks in all his science subjects (Lee, 2004a). Lim Soo Ping (Deputy Secretary, Information and the Arts, Ministry of Information) called the library “my friend in need”(p.21) as he used the library for his study during his school days, winning the Colombo Plan Scholarship with the help of the rich reference collection that allowed him to prepare for the scholarship interview (Lim, 2004b). Seet Khiam Keong (Academic) called it a “strange and wonderful affair”(p.27), when he recollected the time that he spent in the National Library of Singapore for his research on the corporate history of the National Library while he was concurrently doing his full-time postgraduate study (Seet, 2004).

Besides reading, study and research, some Singaporeans found other types of solace by visiting the National Library of Singapore. For example, Chai Yen Hoong (Homemaker) felt the peace of the place during her visits to the library (Chai, 2004). While the library became a refuge for Tan Eng Mui (Patient Service Assistant) when he was out of a job (Tan, 2004).

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Over the years, the National Library of Singapore followed the growth of generations of Singaporeans, who collectively learned together and grew together. By entering the library community, local Singaporeans were collectively influenced or transformed in myriad ways.

Integration and fulfillment of needs

Over the years, the National Library of Singapore catered to the needs of local Singaporeans by providing study space, decentralizing the library for convenience of access, supplying local Singaporeans with multilingual collections, as well as fulfilling the needs of diverse groups. The rest of the section will examine each of these needs in turn.

Over the years, the population of Singapore grew multifold. During the period from 1819 to 1957, the population increased from 150 to 1,445,929 (Saw, 2007). Despite the rapid increase in the population, the supply of decent housing did not keep pace, resulting in the growth of slums, especially in the city area (Teh, 1975). Basically, the living situation for the majority of Singaporeans before 1960 was marked by over-crowdedness and poor living conditions. Improvement began after the adoption of the Statutory Master Plan in the 1950s and the housing policy of the Housing and Development Board (HDB) in the 1960s (Tai, 1981). One important objective of the Master Plan was to reduce the population of the Central Area so as to solve the issue of over-crowdedness (Tai, 1981). Following the guidelines of the Master Plan, public housing estates were developed by the HDB outside that area (Tai, 1981). So effective was the policy that by 1977 the population in the Central Area was reduced to 200,000 (Tai, 1981). But in relieving the congestion of the central area, the plan inadvertently created a problem for the library. When more and more Singaporeans moved to live in public housing farther away from the center, they also were farther from the newly liberalized library. Using Kate Ferguson's (the British Council Library Advisor) branch libraries scheme as the blueprint, the National Library

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of Singapore made strenuous efforts to carry out a decentralization program (Seet, 1983; Seet, 2005). In the 1960s and 1970s, part-time branch libraries and mobile libraries were deployed to serve the rural and urban areas (Lim, 2010). Starting from 1970, full time branch libraries were established one by one, catering for the needs of the people in new towns and industrial estates (Lim, 2010). The part-time branch libraries and the mobile libraries were popular among the children during the 1960s. In 1967, for example, 35.14% of total loans (582,614) made to children (with children accounting for 71.77% of the total library membership in 1967 (Seet, 1983)) were from those part-time branch libraries and the mobile libraries (National Library of Singapore, 1968). The popularity and heavy utilization of the part-time branch libraries and the mobile libraries testified that the decentralization practice of the National Library of Singapore effectively met the needs of the people.

Despite the successful development of improved housing estates, Singaporean continued to live crowded lives. As late as 1970, the average number of households per unit was 1.24; the average number of rooms per household was 2.15; and the average number of persons per room was 2.52 (Yeh, 1975). Under such conditions, the study rooms provided by the National Library of Singapore found favor from many Singaporeans as they desperately needed space for their study. The open-air study room at the National Library, able as it was to seat a hundred people, was very popular among secondary school students, especially during examination periods (National Library of Singapore, 1965). In fact, in view of the popularity of the study room facilities and the lack of the space, the library needed to find other solutions to the problem of study space, working with the People's Association⁴ to provide a list of basic reference books for study rooms located inside local community centers (National Library Board, 1972).

⁴ The People's Association (PA) was established on July 1, 1960, aiming to foster racial harmony and social cohesion. Wide ranges of program were provided by the PA, catering to the diverse needs of Singaporeans. (People's Association. (2011b) "*People's Association: history of PA*", available at: <http://www.pa.gov.sg/history-of-pa.html>. (accessed 31 Oct 2012), People's Association. (2012) "*People's Association: about us*", available at:

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But perhaps more importantly than providing space for study was the library's collection policy. It has already been noted that the colonial library was notorious for collecting mostly English language materials, but that this changed in the more nationalist atmosphere of the 1950s and 1960s. The library attuned itself to the nascent community by building up a multilingual collection in Chinese, Malay, Tamil and English over the years (see Table 3). To a certain extent, the library's effort in building up a multilingual collection (especially the Chinese collection) was closely linked to the strategy that the Singapore Government adopted in tackling the tricky issue of ethnic Chinese (Luyt, 2009a). On the issue of ethnic Chinese in Singapore, Carl A. Trocki (2006) noted that "This group, the majority of Singapore's population, continued to present an unresolvable dilemma. The PAP needed their votes to continue to win elections, but it was determined to prevent them from developing an autonomous political or social presence"(p.129). To the Singapore government, one solution to the dilemma posed by the ethnic Chinese was to include or co-opt the ethnic Chinese into the state through various channels, including the library. In a letter from Dr. Goh Keng Swee, (Minister for Finance) to S. Rajaratnam (Minister for Culture), Goh wrote that "As you know, it is one of the basic items of policy of the Government to absorb 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. The problem is difficult because the main source of books, Communist China, presents a delicate problem. I suggest that you get a team or committee of experts to consider how the Chinese section of the National Library can be expanded"(Goh, 1962). In reply to Goh's letter, Rajaratnam wrote that "I am taking action on your suggestion to form a committee of experts to study the question of expansion of the Chinese services"(Rajaratnam, 1963). To help build up the vernacular collection, action was taken by the library. The Committee on service in the Chinese Language was established in January 1965 and

<http://www.pa.gov.sg/about-us.html>. (accessed 31 Oct 2012). People's Association. (2011a) "Annual report FY2010", available at: <http://www.calameo.com/read/000485916ba3dc3fdf3aa>. (accessed 8 Nov 2012).)

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its chairman, Mr. Fong Sip Chee, was invited to the National Library Board meeting to recommend what should be done to develop the Chinese collection (National Library Board, 1965). Fong's recommendation included enhancing the bi-lingual capability possessed by sectional heads, with at least one library officer to be knowledgeable in Chinese in every section, establishment of a Chinese Cataloging Section, compilation of a union catalogue in Chinese, and the arrangement of Chinese library officer training courses (National Library Board, 1965).

Table 3 National Library of Singapore book collection by language 1959-1981

Year	1959	1961	1971	1981
Chinese	2,000	21,586	139,922	410,848
English	142,500	152,111	275,573	777,532
Malay	1,000	5,548	66,363	180,768
Tamil	1,000	6,422	38,422	64,604

(Seet, 1983)

Supplementing its increased collection of vernacular language material, the library also employed other means to promote multilingualism. Various booklists were issued by the National Library in four languages, such as Chinese lists of children's books on science and fairy tales, English lists of books on management, sports and games, Malay lists of children and adult books, and a Tamil list of children's informational books (National Library of Singapore, 1970). Various storytelling sessions in Chinese, English, Malay and Tamil were organized by the library in the Children's Section with the popularity of the storytelling session being so high that sometimes children were turned away because of the lack of space (National Library of Singapore, 1965; National Library of Singapore, 1966; National Library of Singapore, 1967; National Library of Singapore, 1968; National Library of Singapore, 1969).

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With the help of the National Library of Singapore, many groups in Singapore fulfilled their needs. Recognizing the importance of school libraries to education, the library provided advice and assistance to help schools build or reorganize their libraries (National Library of Singapore, 1968). Special services were arranged for adult education. For example, booklists were compiled for the University of Singapore for course use and senior library staff delivered a course on *How to use a library* for students enrolled with the Adult Education Board (National Library of Singapore, 1968). Less fortunate groups such as the blind were also catered for. Special services were arranged for them: a weekly storytelling session, loan of talking books, and provision of Braille books (National Library of Singapore, 1968).

The majority of Singaporeans with their long neglected information needs finally found a place inside this community called the National Library of Singapore, where they could use its rich collection, diverse services and qualified staff for information, understanding and entertainment as such needs arose from their study, their work, and above all, their daily life. As the needs were fulfilled again and again, a sense of community would have gained strength day by day, leading in the end to the deep feeling of attachment observed in the 1990s over the National Library building as a place.

Shared emotional connection

Over the years, the National Library of Singapore provided Singaporeans with a place for interpersonal contact. Amy Khor (Mayor, South West District, Singapore) loved to use the entrance to the National Library as a place to meet her classmates (Khor, 2004). To Wee Chee Chau (Doctor), the National Library of Singapore was a good place where he could meet his friends and the site of his first date (Wee, 2004). During the 1970s, due to the fact that there were few places to go to, many young people were attracted to the National Library (Straits Times,

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1999b). Its popularity among the local young people can be gauged from the remark made by Dr. Yaacob that "If you were not there, you were out. It was like Orchard Road⁵ for the young people then" (Straits Times, 1999b).

Many members of the public experienced such high quality interactions during their visit to the National Library that many years later they could still vividly recall what had become deeply cherished memories. Lock Lai Wun (Manager) loved the National Library deeply because, besides immersing herself in the world of information provided by the books in the library, she actively took part in its various programs, such as performing English drama and attending the tango class at night (Lock, 2004). To Mohamad Hazriq Bin Idrus (Library Officer), his early experience was the origin of his passion toward theatre as he remembered his childhood participation in the various storytelling sessions held in the library (Bin Idrus, 2004). The National Library of Singapore was a home to the Young Writers' Circle, who used the venue for their monthly meetings, encouraging and inspiring the creative works of local writers (Ng, 2004). It was on the premises of the library that Edmond Ng (Writer) found his love for writing (Ng, 2004). The high quality interactions experienced by local Singaporeans during their stay in the National Library engendered positive impressions and good relationships, resulting in their strong emotional bonding toward the library.

⁵ Orchard Road is also called in Chinese as *Tang Leng Pa Sat Koi* (Tanglin Market Street), and in Tamil as *Vaira Kimadam* (Fakir's Place) or *Mattu Than* (High Ground). It used to be a place for gambier and pepper plantations in 1830s and later nutmeg plantation and fruit orchards. Nowadays, Orchard Road is a flourishing commercial street packed with shopping malls, where shoppers and tourists love to visit. (Edwards, N. and Keys, P. (1988), *Singapore: a guide to buildings, streets, places*, Times Books International, Singapore, Eliot, J. and Bickersteth, J. (1999), *Footprint Singapore handbook*, Footprint Handbooks, Bath, Savage, V. R. and Yeoh, B. S. A. (2004), *Toponymics: a study of Singapore street names*, Eastern Universities Press, Singapore, Tyers, R. (1993), *Ray Tyers' Singapore: then & now*, Landmark Books, Singapore.)

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At the same time Singaporeans involved themselves with the National Library, they invested part of themselves into community life. Toh Chew Seng (2004) (Teacher) referred to her more than thirty years' involvement with the library as a "date"(p.104), during which she acted as a teacher in the library for young people who loved Chinese literature, chaired a seminar on the past, the present and the future of Singapore Chinese literature⁶, participated in multilingual poem recitals and many other activities. As time went by, such involvements leapt from quantity to quality as the participants eventually became emotionally involved.

With the National Library of Singapore's transformation into a free public library in the 1950s, it entered into the life of local, common Singaporeans. It was a place that potentially at least belonged to every Singaporean, rich or poor, powerful or powerless, knowledgeable or ignorant. It played an important role in uniting multilingual multiracial Singaporeans to come together under the same roof, where they would playfully or diligently learn together, discover themselves or others around them, and grow older together. Deep emotional bonds permeated the community. The National Library of Singapore meant a great deal to the collective life of local Singaporeans. They loved it and the building that contained it deeply. As a gesture of this love, the general public and the library staff keenly participated in penning fragments of their fond memories about the old National Library building, collectively producing a book that recounted the memories of local Singaporeans and their beloved library building for the past 44 years (Ngian, 2004a). The book collected 107 voices of local Singaporeans. The actual number of submissions was much more than could be used as remarked by Philip Lee (the editor). In his

⁶ Singapore Chinese literature was one branch of overseas Chinese literature. It used to be one part of Malayan Chinese literature as Singapore was a part of Malaya in her early history. In its nascent period, the majority of the writers were Chinese immigrants from China. As a result, Singapore Chinese literature in its early days was strongly influenced by Chinese literature in China. After 1965, writers started to write from a Singaporean perspective, emancipating themselves from the immigrant consciousness. The theme of the works tended to focus on the urban experience. (*Singapore Chinese literature history (in Chinese)*. (2002), Department of Chinese Studies, National University of Singapore & Global Publishing, Singapore, Zhou, N. (2003), *Singapore Chinese literature (in Chinese)*, Singapore Literature Society, Singapore.)

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(2004b) words, "The response from the public to write about their memories of the library was very encouraging. We received too many submissions for all to be used in this book. Many people recalled similar incidents but expressed them in different ways" (p.5). Usually people do certain things voluntarily, when they care for certain things. The overwhelming resonance from the general public evinced the collective love of Singaporeans towards their National Library.

Conclusion

It seems to us that the answer to the aforementioned question of the puzzling phenomenon of the controversy surrounding the National Library of Singapore building is that the charm of the National Library building comes not from its physical appearance based on aesthetic criteria but from a sense of community that the National Library of Singapore has successfully fostered among local Singaporeans over the years. The transformation of the library to a truly public institution in the 1950s effectively enlarged its boundaries, aiming to include most Singaporeans. Upon joining the community of the National Library, local Singaporeans underwent a bidirectional process of influencing and being influenced. Situating itself in the life of the Singaporeans, the library made strenuous efforts to meet the needs of Singaporeans in myriad ways. With the fulfillment of their needs, a further development of the sense of the community among the multilingual multiracial Singaporeans was reinforced. In the premises of the library, Singaporeans encountered and interacted with each other, learning together and growing together. A shared emotional connection in the community was engendered as a result of this frequent contact and high-quality interaction. During the same process of fostering a sense of community among local Singaporeans, the library also facilitated the formation of a Singaporean national identity. With the help of the National Library, the local Chinese, Malay, Indian, European and Eurasians collectively imagined a nation called Singapore, constructed Singaporean identity and identified themselves with the constructed Singaporean identity. Over the years, the National

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Library of Singapore acted as cement, sustaining social cohesion in the multilingual multiracial society of Singapore.

Our study of the National Library of Singapore shows that the library is more than its building, collections, services and the trained qualified staff. The power or the role the library can play in society is something that might be beyond imagination of the library staff or common people in society. In our world plagued with ceaseless conflicts, the library can contribute to resolution via playing its role in creating a sense of community if the library understands how to do so as our case of the National Library of Singapore shows us. As a social institution, the library exists neither in vacuum nor in isolation. While being influenced by various social and cultural frameworks under which it operates, the library should recognize its potential, utilize its power, actively take part in and influence the society so as to make it a better place for everyone to live in.

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