

National Library of Singapore and Its Archive Function

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Background

The National Library of Singapore was established in 1960 when the library operations were taken out of the Singapore Museum building. Since then, it has been instrumental in developing library services in Singapore, playing the dual role of a national library as well as a public library.

As a result of a study by the Library 2000 Committee, the National Library Board (NLB) was established on 1 September 1995 to spearhead the formulation of new policies, strategies and the implementation of the recommendations of the Library 2000 Report. The Board is also responsible for setting up a world-class library system that would be convenient, accessible and useful to the people of Singapore. The mission of the Board is to expand the learning capacity of the nation so as to enhance national competitiveness and to promote a gracious society. NLB now operates a network of libraries, which includes 2 regional libraries, 18 community libraries and 42 community children's libraries.

NLB's Resources

The Board acquires materials that meet the information needs of different segments of the population in the 4 official languages namely English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil. Besides print and non-print materials, special materials such as filmstrips, microforms and databases are also acquired or subscribed to. By end of March 2002, its collection was 4,277,007 materials in English, 1,695,183 in Chinese, 553,073 in Malay and 187,931 in Tamil.

Increasingly, more and more electronic resources are being acquired, mostly in the form of databases subscriptions. Depending on the types of databases, these are made accessible either on-site or through the web.

In terms of subject coverage, most of the branch libraries house popular subject areas for children right up to working adults and they are mostly for lending. The National Reference Library on the other hand, provides a diverse range of research and reference services to government departments, business and industry sectors as well as the general public, including students.

The National Reference Library houses a special collection of over 100,000 printed items on Singapore and Southeast Asia, including about 2,000 rare books in addition to the non-print materials such as microfilms, microfiche and CD-ROMs. These constitute an important resource of Singapore's historical and cultural heritage and contribute to enhancing the special character of the library. These form part of NLB's heritage collection.

Acquisition Strategies

Most of the materials are purchased through a list of registered book vendors who represent local and foreign publishers. Their performances are regularly monitored and reviewed. All purchases are done centrally, processed and distributed to all the relevant branches.

The materials are also acquired through donation from private collectors, well-wishers and supporters as well as through a network of more than 100 exchange partners, both local and abroad. We were able to acquire a lot of unpub-

lished materials and sometimes obscure imprints through such channels. Many of our heritage materials are acquired through such methods as most of them were kept by the writers themselves or were in the hands of private collectors, academic and social organisations as well as government institutions. It was usually very difficult for commercial book vendors to lay their hands on such materials.

Locally published materials are acquired through legislation. Under the National Library Board Act, 2 copies of all print and non-printed materials that are published or produced in Singapore, intended for sale or public distribution must be deposited with the Legal Deposit Section which includes:

- a) Any printed books, periodical, annual reports, newsletter, newspaper, pamphlet, musical score, map, chart, plan, picture, photograph, print and other printed matter;
- b) Any film (including microfilm and microfiche), negative, tape, disc, sound track and any other device in which one or more visual images, sounds or other data are embodied so as to be capable (with or without the aid of some other equipment) of being reproduced from it. Examples of non-print materials to be deposited are video recordings, CDs, sound recordings and computer software.

Materials are either deposited in person or sent in through the post. Publishers are constantly alerted about the legal deposit requirements through notices sent to them when they apply for ISBNs and ISSNs. The library also sends letters regularly to publishers to remind them about their responsibility to deposit titles published with the library.

Archival Initiatives for the Heritage Documents

The heritage collection includes all materials on or about Singapore. It also covers materials which are published in Singapore and are in all formats, all languages, published and unpublished. Also included are about 5,000 rare books, mainly on Singapore or the ASEAN region. These materials are kept in the National Reference Library and in the Legal Deposit Section. There are also copies of most of these materials available either as reference or for lending at the various branch libraries.

Heritage materials housed at the National Reference Library are kept in a dedicated room with controlled temperature and limited access facility. Wherever possible, duplicate copies are made available on the open shelves to facilitate open access to these materials. The rare books are kept in a separate room with 24-hour air-conditioning and controlled relative humidity. Users need to get special permission to enter the room and to use the collection.

Some of these materials are also sent for microfilming and readers are encouraged to use these microfilm copies, thus minimizing the usage of the original materials. Currently, those microfilmed include selected foreign newspapers, government gazettes, all local newspapers, selected rare books and other precious publications. All master microfilms are kept in a strong room with controlled temperature and relative humidity. Only duplicates of these materials are made available to users.

Less frequently used reference materials, especially those relating to Singapore and Southeast Asia, those which are out of print and those that carry the status of being "the last copy" in the system are kept in the Repository Used (RU) Collection. These materials are eminently suited for research purposes and are kept as a repository collection to enable us to fulfill readers' request for such materials. Materials are made available on request only.

For those housed in the Legal Deposit Section, different storage conditions for different formats are adopted. All printed materials are placed in acid-free storage boxes, which are then placed in 25 m high x 5 m wide mobile shelves. Non-print and rare materials are stored in a dehumidified room with controlled temperature and relative humidity.

To ensure proper inventory and easy access, every item received under the Legal Deposit is registered and given a unique registration number. They are then processed and shelved separately by formats. These materials are not for use by readers, unless under very special circumstances. This is to minimize the possibility of damaging the materials, as we have to keep them for posterity.

Another strategy adopted was to keep the materials deposited at two different locations. It is two-pronged approach; one is to ensure that there will be another copy in the system should disaster strike while at the same time allowing users to gain access to these materials. The other copy is kept separately for preservation and is not accessible to users except under very special circumstances.

The Library views preservation as very important in its effort to be the guardian of the country's literary heritage. It is currently looking into engaging a consultant to advise on suitable methods that could be applied to preserve the heritage collection. In the meantime, as and when materials are

found to be in need of repair or restoration, they are sent to the National Archive and treated based on the advice given by the experts there.

Digitisation

The Board has so far digitized some 6,000 images from its collection of rare books. The images are chosen based on the two themes of *Sir Stamford Raffles* and *Singapore Landmarks*. The rare books/materials from which the relevant information on the two themes is obtained, are digitised in full, to make the digital copy more widely accessible as well as to preserve the original rare materials from too much handling. Metadata records based on MARC21 were also created for these images.

Future Prospects of Archive Function

One of the objectives of the Board is to preserve the literary heritage of a nation and this could only be achieved through proper preservation and archiving programmes. Every heritage material acquired either through purchase, gift or legislation must be properly archived to ensure its accessibility by both present and future generations of users.

The challenge is how to ensure that the preservation and archiving methods chosen would ensure that the materials would continue to be accessible regardless of technological changes.

The Challenges Faced in Promoting Archiving Programme

One of the many difficulties faced in promoting an archiving programme is the lack of expertise within the organisation. More often than not, we need to depend on external experts to identify archiving needs and what needs to be put in place to ensure that archiving is effectively planned and carried out. The consequence of this is the library's inability to plan and implement a total archiving plan that could be used for an extended period of time.

The other major issue is the difficulty of getting publishers to deposit materials in the archival formats. For print materials for instance, not many publishers would want to publish titles using acid-free paper due to its comparatively higher cost and it is not practical to demand that publishers print copies that are to be deposited using acid-free paper while the rests of the print run is done using ordinary paper.

This is also true for non-print materials. Titles produced in the preservation formats are usually the master copies and these are usually very expensive. What were eventually released in the market are access copies and would not be suitable to be kept for an extended period of time.

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