

# THE BAREFOOT LIBRARIAN

D E K WIJASURIYA  
LIM HUCK-TEE &  
RADHA NADARAJAH

Library developments in Southeast Asia  
with special reference to Malaysia



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# INTRODUCTION

This book is the outcome of Asia-centricism. It is in fact the outcome of a concern that so many of the statements on Southeast Asia generally, and libraries in particular, have been written by those who have been exposed almost too superficially to the complexities of Southeast Asia. In a sense this book has a mission—to stimulate reaction, criticism, irritation even, principally from within Southeast Asia itself and, in so doing, to motivate further studies of this nature. Ultimately the solutions to Southeast Asian problems, at least in respect of libraries, would seem to lie in the Southeast Asians themselves. A strong motivating factor has also been the desire to provide as up-to-date a text as possible, principally on library developments in Malaysia since the publication of Lim Huck-Tee's *Libraries in West Malaysia and Singapore*. Within Southeast Asia, so many of the problems are similar and it could well be that the solutions adopted in one country could be applied with success elsewhere in the region. But we are so woefully informed of one another's doings. We still approach most of our problems with Western blinkers on. We need to beam inwards more.

This book is not intended as an exercise in comparative librarianship although it could stimulate a series of useful comparative studies. Library development in Southeast Asia may be the result of government policy and financial provision, but it is also the result of professional endeavour and the calibre of the professionals we put into the field. For too long we have been sending young nationals for training abroad and exposing them to the sophistication of western developments in librarianship. We have tended to equip them with skills but not with a mission, a purpose. There is still a strong tendency for young professionals to opt for service in the bigger libraries located in urban centres. Is it possible to create a new breed of 'barefoot librarians' imbued with a strong sense of purpose who see service in out-lying islands and the rural areas as a challenge? The idea of a barefoot librarian was first expounded in the

opening address of Ambassador Leticia R Shahani, at the Second Conference of Southeast Asian Librarians in Manila in December 1973. The idea is indeed refreshing and calls for considerable soul-searching, particularly in our training programmes, our library networks and our administrative arrangements. These are no doubt conflicting objectives. Can we develop the barefoot librarians and at the same time attempt to raise the general status and salary of professional librarians? We hasten to add that we are not advocating a corpus of semi-professionals to be sent out into the field, although such a category we also need. Exposure to developments in western countries is still very important, but it must come after sufficient exposure to problems in their own countries.

*The barefoot librarian* was felt to be an apt title for this book because it illustrates the underlying poverty of provision in the Southeast Asian region as a whole. Library provision is still geared to the élite and is accessible only to the educated minority. This, one hopes, will progressively change in view of the fact that ignorance, prejudice and poverty have for long been the hotbeds of insurgency, conflict and political strife. In Southeast Asia, libraries can truly become a potent force for economic and social development, and their establishment and improvement should become part and parcel of overall national development effort. Too often libraries and library development appear to have been everybody's concern but nobody's responsibility. However, it is gratifying to record that in some of the Southeast Asian countries, particularly Malaysia and Singapore, increasing government concern and provision have accelerated the pace of library development.

*The barefoot librarian* is perhaps the first book about Southeast Asian libraries by the Southeast Asians themselves, and it has many limitations. Published literature, apart from being limited, has on occasion been in languages not widely understood. It would have been ideal if a travel grant could have been made available for at least one if not all of the authors to visit the Southeast Asian countries to gather relevant material and to have discussions with key personnel. But this, alas, was not possible. We realise therefore that our coverage of Southeast Asia, outside of Malaysia and Singapore, may in fact be sketchy and uneven. For this we apologise to our colleagues and we hope that this will stimulate them to write independently about the library situation in their own countries.

Finally, we wish to record our appreciation for the assistance given to us by professional colleagues in Malaysia who responded so readily to requests for information. We are also indebted to the various

writers on Southeast Asia for the background which their works have provided. We wish to stress, however, that the views expressed in this book are entirely our own and do not reflect those of the institutions to which we are attached. We end with what we hope is an apt proverb:

Gajah berkaki empat lagi terdorong

*Even elephants will stumble,*

*Though they have four feet*

*All of us are prone to tumble,*

*Though we be discreet*

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# CHAPTER I

## THE SOUTHEAST ASIAN ENVIRONMENT

Before a study of Southeast Asian libraries is possible, it is necessary to examine the nature of the environment which will permit their growth or hinder their development, for like biological organisms, libraries must be studied in relation to their environment. A study of the ecology of libraries, the way they interact with the physical, social, cultural and economic environment, is crucial towards an understanding of the character, nature and development of Southeast Asian libraries.

### THE GEOGRAPHIC SETTING

Southeast Asia, a collective term which came into fashionable use during the second world war, is used to describe the area comprising Burma, Thailand, Laos, the Khmer Republic (formerly Cambodia), the Republic of Vietnam (South), the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North), Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei and the Philippines. The first six countries, sometimes known collectively as mainland Southeast Asia, have cultures based essentially on Buddhism, while the other countries constitute what is usually known as island Southeast Asia, essentially Islamic and Malay in culture and heritage. Although geographically Southeast Asia forms a distinct region in that it is monsoon in character, almost wholly in the humid tropics, and straddles the equator, it is also a region of tremendous contrasts, with fertile plains, humid tropical jungles, thousands of islands and mighty rivers, as well as an immense mass of rugged mountains cloaked with thick forests. It extends more than 3,000 miles from east to west and more than 2,000 miles from north to south.

### THE HISTORICAL, POLITICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING

Southeast Asia has for many centuries been the battleground of conflicting powers, cultures, philosophies and religions. Because it is situated at the confluence of the two great civilizations of India and

# CHAPTER II

## LIBRARY DEVELOPMENTS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

The pattern of library developments in Southeast Asia must be viewed against the background factors discussed in chapter I. It would be difficult to single out one determinant factor, since it has inevitably been a combination of factors—geographical, historical, political, economic and educational—which together constitute the 'intricate symbiosis of the library and its environment'. (A D Burnett, 1971, p 17).

All Southeast Asian countries, with the exception of Thailand, have at some time been colonized by western powers. These periods of colonization have had a major influence on library development in these countries. More recently, American influence has been an important factor in the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand and South Vietnam. However, before the arrival of western influence, libraries or organized collections of books and manuscripts existed, but these were mainly religious collections or private collections of the royalty. In Thailand, for instance, the first library was established during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and contained many Buddhist books. Similarly, rich Buddhist collections existed in Burma before the arrival of the British, but unfortunately many of these were lost or destroyed during the period of British colonization.

Generally, the long dominance of western powers over Southeast Asian countries resulted in the establishment of libraries, some of which were open to the public. World war II and the Japanese occupation of many Southeast Asian countries, however, was a major setback to library development in the region. Planned library development in Southeast Asia has therefore been a post-war, post-independence effort. Since the achievement of independence, many Southeast Asian countries have been engaged in 'breaking the shackles of economic stagnation of the preceding period and achieving an accelerated economic growth'. (Unesco Meeting of experts on the national planning of library services in Asia, 1968, p 6). This, coupled with the expansion of education, has contributed to the development of libraries.

# CHAPTER III

## MALAYSIAN LIBRARY DEVELOPMENT: NATIONAL, PUBLIC, SCHOOL

Library development in Malaysia has been a post-independence phenomenon. There is little evidence to show that the British administration in the pre-independence period gave any consideration to the provision of library services. The Kate Ferguson survey of library facilities in Malaya (1950) represented British Council effort and did not imply official government sanction and backing.

In the post-independence era, many of the institutions established under British administration continued to function, sometimes with little change. Unfortunately, no authority or agency existed then for library services in general. Hence this aspect of service tended to be neglected. Malaysia was fortunate, however, in that during this period a handful of dedicated librarians kept drawing the attention of the government and the public to the need for library services. Particularly, credit must be given to Wilfred J Plumbe, then University of Malaya Librarian, for his dedication to the cause of Malaysian library development. Plumbe had the knack of infusing his enthusiasm into others. He selected a small group of Malaysians to serve in the University of Malaya Library, some of whom continue today to remain among the prime movers in efforts to develop library services in the country.

However, it cannot be said that at any stage was there a public outcry or demand for library services. Even today, the lack of a public expression of this need tends to weaken official efforts at provision. This is particularly true in the national and public library fields. Complaints of poor service or the lack of it appear from time to time in the columns of the local newspapers. But these do not appear to generate much interest. Although the democratic tradition has survived and adapted remarkably well in Malaysia, the tendency for the public to agitate for service through their elected representatives at local, state or federal level is somewhat minimal. Ultimately, the state legislative assemblies and the

# CHAPTER IV

## UNIVERSITY AND COLLEGE LIBRARIES IN MALAYSIA

University and college education in Malaysia is essentially a post-independence phenomenon. The tremendous expansion in higher education in the past few years has been partially due to the quickening tempo of economic growth in Malaysia, with its attendant demand for more educated manpower, and partially to the need to create national unity through the curriculum and through restructuring society by providing more educational opportunities for the indigenous community. The overriding nature of social concerns over purely academic ones has proved to be challenging to university and college libraries, which have had to modify their primary goals of supporting the teaching and research functions of their parent institutions to include supporting the educational philosophy of the state and the nation.

Higher education in Malaysia is provided by five universities, *viz* the University of Malaya (Universiti Malaya), the University of Science (Universiti Sains Malaysia), the National University of Malaysia (Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia), the University of Agriculture (Universiti Pertanian Malaysia) and the National Institute of Technology (Institut Teknologi Kebangsaan). In addition, there exist some 22 colleges, of which 19 are teacher training colleges. The remaining 3 are the MARA Institute of Technology (Institut Teknologi MARA), Tunku Abdul Rahman College and the Ungku Omar Polytechnic.

### UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

University libraries constitute the most important group of libraries in Malaysia in terms of financial allocation. The annual expenditure on the five university libraries in 1973 was in excess of M\$7.5 million. This is a significant amount, since it represented more than 10 per cent of total expenditure on universities in 1973, and more than twice the amount expended on all other types of libraries. It is thus not surprising that the total professional establishment in university libraries in 1973 was 82 out of a total of 193 for the whole country.

# CHAPTER V

## SPECIAL LIBRARIES IN MALAYSIA

Most of Malaysia's special libraries are those attached to government departments or statutory authorities and are financed wholly or partially from federal or state government funds. The reasons for the lack of privately financed special libraries are not difficult to find. The majority of industrial and commercial firms are subsidiaries of overseas firms and rely on their parent organizations to supply them with information regarding the latest technical developments. Local firms in the main are small operations and do not have the necessary funds to conduct any extensive research. As a result, few commercial and industrial firms find it necessary to possess reference collections of any importance, although quite a number subscribe to journals which are of interest to themselves and maintain stocks of their journal publications. In a recent survey (1973) of some fifteen manufacturing and processing establishments and thirty-four commercial organizations in the State of Penang, Malaysia, it was found that nearly 80 per cent of the manufacturing group and 69.7 per cent of the commercial firms possessed book collections of 100 volumes or less and that none of the manufacturing and commercial establishments had collections in excess of 500 volumes. However, there is evidence of increasing interest on the part of the commercial and private sector in establishing libraries as shown by the recent attempts to recruit professional librarians. The situation in respect of learned and professional associations and societies is no better. Although there are over 11,000 registered societies and associations in Malaysia, these are mainly social clubs and the number of professional societies is quite small. Those societies or associations which possess small libraries usually do not have collections in excess of a few hundred volumes. The exception is the library of the Federation of Family Planning Associations which has a collection of about 1,500 volumes and some 80 periodical titles. This library, which is being funded by the International Planned Parenthood Federation, is expanding fairly rapidly and is managed by a qualified librarian.

# CHAPTER VI

## PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

### SOUTHEAST ASIA

Unevenness in the development of libraries and library services in the Southeast Asian countries is reflected also in the development of their professional associations. Countries in mainland Southeast Asia, particularly Burma, Laos, the Khmer Republic, North and South Vietnam have not reached a stage of library development capable of nurturing and sustaining an organized professional association. The Burma Library Association, originally established in 1952-1953, appears now to be defunct. In Laos, the Association des Bibliothécaires Lao or Association of Lao Librarians exists in Vientiane but does not appear to be active. In the Republic of Khmer, as well as in North Vietnam, no professional association of librarians is known to exist. The position however improves somewhat in the case of South Vietnam. Here the Vietnamese Library Association (VLA) or Hôi Thù-Viên Việt-Nam, first established in Saigon in 1958 and inactive for nearly a decade, has begun to function again. VLA objectives are to foster the establishment, development and use of libraries in Vietnam, to encourage professional education and training, to conduct studies within the field and to produce and distribute books and other library materials for its members. VLA, with an executive council and a membership of over 280, sponsors conferences and training courses and publishes the *Thù-Viên Tập-san* (VLA library bulletin). It has also published *Cataloguing and classification with Dewey classification*, *List of basic headings* and *Directory of libraries*.

Countries in mainland and island Southeast Asia where library development has been relatively more advanced have had professional associations for librarians for two or more decades. The Thai Library Association (TLA) was first established in 1954. The Asosiasi Perpustakaan Arsip dan Dokumentasi Indonesia (APADI) or Indonesian Library, Archive and Documentation Association was first established in 1953 under the name Perhimpunan Ahli Perpustakaan Seluruh Indonesia. The Malayan

# CHAPTER VII

## LIBRARY EDUCATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

The growth and development of library education and training programmes in Southeast Asian countries reveal similar trends. Initially, training was through short courses or in-service training conducted by expatriate librarians and this was followed by periods of study abroad by Southeast Asian nationals who on their return conducted these training courses. In Malaysia and Singapore, the courses were designed to prepare students for the Library Association, United Kingdom (LA[UK]) professional examinations. The inadequacy of these courses and the demand for qualified personnel resulted in the emergence of indigenous library schools.

Though this has been the general pattern of development, not all Southeast Asian countries have gone through the same stages nor are they now at the same stage of development. Thus within Southeast Asia, library schools have been established in Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and Malaysia but not in Burma, the Khmer Republic, Laos, Singapore and the Republic of Vietnam.

### INDONESIA

The beginnings of library education in Indonesia go back to the early fifties. During the period 1952 to 1956 several Indonesians were sent to Holland for a course in librarianship. The first local course for the training of Indonesian librarians, however, was conducted in Jakarta by the Ministry of Education and Culture in 1952. This part-time course of two years' duration was patterned after the Dutch system of library education. It was meant to train librarians to work in the various ministries of the Indonesian government. By 1960 the course was extended to three years and the ministry attributed to their training course the status of a library school. In 1961 the library school was transferred from the Ministry of Education and Culture to the newly established Faculty of Teacher Training and Education Science of the University of Indonesia (UI) in Jakarta, thereby enhancing its status.

# CHAPTER VIII

## LIBRARY COOPERATION

Library cooperation has frequently been packaged like a sexy haircream or an exciting new car to attract attention and demand. It is neither the millennial package nor the panacea for all library problems and it is perhaps time that efforts be made to de-mythologize it. Theoretically, library cooperation can be carried out at the national, regional or international level. In the context of this chapter, national cooperation would involve cooperation between one or more libraries within the boundaries of a particular state, regional cooperation would mean cooperation between one or more countries in Southeast Asia, while international cooperation would include countries outside the Southeast Asian region. It is axiomatic that cooperation at the national level is far easier to achieve than cooperation which extends beyond national boundaries, largely because the motivation of national interest is usually present in the former. Because of limitations of space it is proposed in this chapter to deal only with cooperation at the regional level and to refer to national or international schemes only insofar as they impinge on regional cooperation.

Anyone examining the record of library cooperation in the Southeast Asian region could perhaps be justifiably excused for being sceptical about the achievements to date. The literature on Southeast Asian librarianship is filled more with pious clichés about the value and importance of cooperation than with actual co-operative projects operating in practice. S D Quiaison, Director of the National Library of the Philippines, has listed some fourteen international and regional seminars and conferences held in Asia between 1955 and 1970 during which various areas of library cooperation were discussed and advocated but were not followed with concrete results. It is for this reason that Lim Huck-Tee in a paper presented at the Library Seminars of the 28th International Congress of Orientalists held in Canberra in 1971 concluded as follows: 'It is clear that the possibilities for international and regional cooperation are rather limited. The various Southeast Asian countries with their different

# CHAPTER IX

## EPILOGUE

In a region of contrasts it is difficult to discern clear cut trends. Variations in economic and social development, in educational opportunities and in literacy may occur as much between countries as within them. These in turn, among other factors, have determined the extent and levels of library provision. There are aspects which are common and experiences which are similar.

### NATIONAL LIBRARIES

Taking note of the low level of literacy in Southeast Asia, the paucity of reading materials, particularly in the indigenous languages, the fact that any public demand for information and knowledge is muted by a stronger demand for basic human necessities like food and shelter, it is indeed curious that so many national libraries already exist in basically non-library environments. The question that arises here is whether these institutions were set up because they were needed. National libraries exist in the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, Burma, Thailand, South Vietnam, Laos and the Republic of Khmer. Only Indonesia lacks such an institution at the present time but is actively planning for one. The question of whether a national library should be developed before other types of libraries is a difficult one to answer. In many of the Southeast Asian countries, the national library has been an expression of emergent nationalism and has come in the wake of a series of 'national' type institutions like a national archives, a national theatre, or a national museum. This is not necessarily wrong. It would seem that in a situation where the concept of libraries is relatively new, and where the profession is weak, a national library can play a crucial role not merely in the limited sense of bringing books and knowledge to the people but also on the broader front of nation-building. However, to do this effectively national libraries must be invested by legal decree with necessary powers and they must be supported with adequate staffing and finance if they are to pay a meaningful

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