

library@chinatown

*BY THE PEOPLE,
FOR THE PEOPLE*

Library@chinatown, Singapore's newest library, is the result of collaboration between the people, public and private sectors. Managed and run by volunteers, the library was set up not only to provide book-lending services. But rather, beyond that, it is a bold attempt to reimagine a library's role as a public learning space, strengthening the sense of community in Singapore.

The Challenge

Singapore's first library was a private enterprise, started in 1823 for the English-literate elite. It began to serve the public only in 1953, when the colonial government accepted a challenge by local philanthropist Lee Kong Chian to match a substantial donation he made, so as to establish a free public library, with collections in the main local languages – English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil.

This new National Library reached out to users in creative ways under the directorship of Ms Hedwig Anuar from the 1960s. A Mobile Library Service was launched, and the first library van was bought





with donations from UNESCO. Another initiative was *Our Library*, a weekly radio programme, and an early example of librarians leveraging “new” media. These efforts were well received by Singapore’s rural and urban communities, in the context of a youthful society with low literacy levels.

Singapore has experienced tremendous social and economic progress since the 1960s, and people began to spend more time elsewhere, like the cinemas and malls. A survey in the early 1990s showed the public felt the library’s collection, services and facilities lacked accessibility and comprehensiveness, and only 12% visited a library in a year. Soon after this, the management of libraries was reorganised under a new National Library Board (NLB), in 1995.

NLB’s journey has involved much experimentation and evolution. At a basic level, we look at the accessibility, quality and range of collections and experiences we provide. Our increasingly diverse society has varied needs, and we have tried to address these, such as through themed libraries. But finite resources mean we could never address every segment, and we must consider how to sustain our efforts, in terms of energy, ideas and funding. More broadly, as people increasingly turn to mediums that are more individualistic, and perhaps less civic, our challenge is to continue to add value as a community learning space. How can libraries mitigate this by strengthening a sense of community in Singapore?



01 Traditionally, library visitors relied on professional librarians to use library services.



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The Solution

In 1996, NLB launched the first libraries to be located in shopping malls, as part of efforts to get closer to our users. In 1999, we launched *library@orchard*, our first “niche” library aimed at youth and located in a mall on Singapore’s premier shopping street. It successfully transformed the image of libraries, partly thanks to programmes co-developed by its volunteers.

These and other experiments laid the groundwork for *library@chinatown*, our first themed library on Chinese arts and culture, located

in the heart of Singapore’s historic Chinatown district. For the first time, a commercial organisation – property developer CP1 Pte Ltd, owner of Chinatown Point Retail – approached us to develop a library in its mall, Chinatown Point. NLB shared its library development know-how, and CP1 sponsored the rental and development costs, covering the design, construction, IT, equipment and collection.

NLB next sought to engage new partners to sustain this library. Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple agreed to sponsor the library’s operating costs, including the periodic refreshing of the collection, organising programmes, utilities and site maintenance.



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NLB then appointed an advisory panel of 12 experts, comprising leading members of the Chinese education, arts, media and business communities. They helped define our target audience, which they felt should include children. Unlike our other niche libraries, such as *library@orchard* and *library@esplanade*, *library@chinatown* has a children's collection to promote the transmission of Chinese culture to the next generation, and to encourage grandparents to bond with their grandchildren at the library. The panel then helped define the collection's scope and subject areas, and recommend titles. An important idea from the panel was to collect books on how Chinese and other cultures influenced each other. The library carries titles on the Straits Chinese – overseas Chinese who interacted over centuries with Malays to form a hybrid culture. It also carries

Malay and Tamil translations of Chinese literature. Finally, the panel was instrumental in developing the Chinese name of the library – 唐城图书馆.

A critical part of our engagement work involves our volunteers. NLB launched its Friends of the Library volunteer programme in 2001, and this really took off in 2005 when we enlarged their scope of work to better harness volunteers' diverse strengths. Volunteering opportunities now include conducting storytelling and craft programmes for children, running book clubs, managing events, library user education, customer service, IT-based activities and collection maintenance. Unlike previously, when volunteers had a supporting role, *library@chinatown* volunteers now perform major library operations functions that are normally handled by NLB staff and third party vendors.

- 01 Exhibition panel at *library@chinatown*.
- 02 Visitors in the adult collection section.
- 03 Signs encourage self-reliance and civic mindedness.



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In the same vein of engaging users and volunteers, in *library@chinatown's* volunteer-driven model, core library functions are spearheaded by Volunteer Service Leaders (VSLs), and supplemented by Volunteer Service Supporters (VSSes), who are all passionate about the library's theme of Chinese arts and culture. In this two-tier set-up, VSLs are trained to oversee the daily operations and take the lead in ensuring that crucial back-end processes, front-end maintenance of the collection, and support for programmes are accomplished by VSSes. VSLs also recruit new volunteers, manage the volunteer



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roster, and advocate graciousness and good library etiquette amongst users as the library's custodians and ambassadors. As a result, NLB's staff deployment is kept to a minimum and focused on guiding and growing the pool of volunteers, while providing basic administrative oversight and accountability.

In part, this achievement builds on our past efforts to automate our processes and educate users to be more independent, by using our Bookdrops, self-check and enquiry stations, and the "Cybrarian" remote enquiry kiosk, which lets users consult library staff stationed in our customer contact centre.

A key challenge is to sustain volunteer involvement and motivation, which can never be taken for granted and requires dedicated resources to cultivate. NLB shows appreciation to VSLs and VSSes by providing non-cash benefits such as appreciation lunches, or special previews of library exhibitions and programmes.

NLB also partners the community in other ways. For example, we have collaborated with Rediffusion, a local private radio service with a history of programming in Chinese dialects, to secure free access to old and new Rediffusion radio programmes, as well as Rediffusion-led activities at *library@chinatown*.

- 01 Volunteers are easily identified by their uniforms.
- 02 Visitors browsing electronic and hardcopy newspapers.
- 03 A volunteer re-shelving books, traditionally a basic function of library staff.

The Outcome

As a small niche library, *library@chinatown* has a healthy start-up collection of 30,000 items, comprising books, magazines and audio visual materials about Chinese arts and culture. In the two months since its opening on 31 January 2013, some 100,000 people had visited *library@chinatown*. In comparison, the average visitorship at *library@esplanade*, a similar set-up, in the same period was about 64,000. A range of programmes has been conducted so far, on subjects like Chinese chess, couplet writing and calligraphy.



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These facts and figures are a result of how we at NLB have traditionally measured our performance – through loans, visitorship, enquiries, collection size, customer satisfaction – all of which are output-driven and dependent on staffing and resources dedicated to delivering library services to the public. But with the inversion of the people-institution power relationship, this raises the question of the relevance of these indicators in measuring our long-term work in promoting learning, building social reliance and cultivating graciousness among Singaporeans.



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At *library@chinatown*, we try to communicate the unique nature of our community-driven library to users. A slight decline in service quality compared with regular libraries was to be expected, but this has been manageable so far. Indeed, we are encouraged that patrons generally accept this and have been more forgiving. With no librarians to intervene on proper usage of the library or to be a point of authority on library collections and services, users of the *library@chinatown* would only have themselves and the shared values of the community to sustain their library experience.

- 01 This niche library attracts volunteers with an interest in Chinese arts and culture.
- 02 Children at a storytelling session.
- 03 Visitors browsing books in the adult collection section.



Elaine Ng is the Chief Executive Officer of the National Library Board (NLB) of Singapore. As CEO of NLB, Mrs Ng oversees the strategic development of the National Library Singapore, the network of 25 public libraries in Singapore and the National Archives of Singapore. She has more than 20 years of experience in the public sector, covering a wide range of portfolios, ranging from policy development to research and corporate governance. Prior to joining the NLB in April 2011, she was the Deputy Chief Executive Officer of the National Heritage Board (NHB) where she was responsible for overseeing heritage development. Mrs Ng holds a Master of Arts (English) from the University of Cambridge, UK, and a Master of Arts in Politics from Brandeis University, USA.