

# Back Talk — Quick Visit to Libraries in Singapore

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Last week I had the opportunity to visit libraries in Singapore. The occasion was an invitation to talk about eBooks east and west before the **Library Association of Singapore**. To gain a better understanding of their libraries, I decided to employ a technique I had used before in Taiwan in 1975-6 and more widely in China in 1979: ask library leaders “what are the three major challenges facing your library?” In Taiwan the five most frequently mentioned problems were:<sup>1</sup>

1. Lack of trained librarians
2. Lack of job openings for professional librarians
3. Inadequate book collections
4. Overabundance of departmental libraries
5. Lack of trained leadership

While I have not completed a thorough follow-up visit to Taiwan’s academic libraries in the intervening nearly 30 years, a visit to several leading libraries last year and other years suggests to me that perhaps all of these problems have been admirably overcome — although I am not sure about the situation related to departmental libraries.

My trip to China with the **Committee on East Asian Libraries** in 1979 resulted in somewhat similar results:<sup>2</sup>

1. Lack of sufficiently trained librarians
2. Lack of good physical facilities
3. Lack of library materials
4. Earlier lack of freedom to collect needed materials, irrespective of their supposed political orientation.

Based upon visits to scores of libraries in China over the last ten or so years, most of these earlier problems have been eradicated completely. Indeed, libraries there are experiencing a boom in collecting, library buildings, and many libraries are full of bright, young, energetic and professionally trained librarians.

So, what would asking the “major challenges” question produce in Singapore? Let me begin by saying that the scale of my visit was quite modest. I visited two universities and two public libraries but also talked to a number of librarians separate from a library visit. Yet, I found the answers interesting and familiar — not only to what I had learned during my earlier two East Asian visits, but also to my own experiences in libraries both here in Hong Kong and earlier in America.

At both of the two university libraries, the issues were the need for more funds, staffing, and space. Singapore, like many parts of Asia,

has had to control/limit its support for education and libraries. Like in Hong Kong, the enormous growth in library funding in the last decade of the 20th Century produced sufficient reserves that a reduction in spending did not produce immediate slashes in collecting and services but gradually these reductions are making their presence felt. More electronic resources and higher prices produce problems that cannot be easily overcome.

The staff related issues were interesting and also familiar. At one university there is a push for professional staff to improve their professional/academic skills but not at the expense of being able to provide their customers needed services. At another university, the issue was being asked to allocate staff to help manage other libraries — but without any additional funds for additional staffing. The librarians in Singapore seemed to be under greater pressure than before to work both harder and smarter. The two public libraries I visited also had interesting staffing issues. Public libraries there, like in other parts of the world, are constantly involved in reaching out to their communities to better understand their needs, finding innovative ways of meeting those needs, and telling the community about their services. On the other hand, doing these things compete with daily jobs like circulating books, keeping order in the library, etc. One public library supervisor told me that it was easy to get the staff to carry out special projects, but more difficult to get them to think out of the box about how to improve everyday services.


The university libraries space problems were nothing new or different from those faced by librarians the world over. It is interesting how we can complain both about not having enough money to buy more content, and not having enough space to house the insufficient content we do acquire. However, no matter how questionable this practice is, it is the case. The university libraries I visited in Singapore were handling their own needs for space without any plans to share a remote storage facility. This is in contrast to Hong Kong’s eight university libraries which are about to request government funding for a shared facility.

The major problems at the two public libraries I visited are only too familiar to their colleagues in other parts of the world. At a busy district library, housed in a very attractive separate three story building, the prob-

lems mentioned included dealing with the noise produced by hoards of students who invade the library as soon as school is out, keeping things in order, and trying to balance meeting the needs of young and old.

The older patrons like the relative quiet that exists up to the time when school is out. The young people have a floor to themselves where music of their choosing is broadcasted, where they can lounge about on bean bag chairs, and even stage performances. On the lower floors the small children and adults compete for space but in their own separate areas. To keep the books in order Singapore’s public library employ high and low technology. For the former, they use RFID tags and conduct regular inventories quickly and efficiently. Low tech-wise, however, involves putting different colors of thin tape horizontally across the spines of the books in different sections of the stacks so that books that don’t belong in that area can be easily spotted and moved to the right neighborhood.

The problem of building collections and providing services for different kinds of patrons was mentioned at both the district library and at a specialized arts public library. In the latter case the need for popular new movies and music differed from those of the serious arts community. At the arts library scattered about the library were self contained shelf mounted boxes with movies or other artistic productions playing to entice the browser to check that item out. In the dance library a ballet was being viewed on a wall. Yet, this library also needed to appeal to the fiction reading, movie borrowing generalist to survive. Enabling staff to be sufficiently skilled to support both groups was one of the major challenges facing this library.

My visit to Singapore suggests to me that our library culture is indeed global and that we have much more in common with each other than is different. 



## Endnotes

1. Taiwan College and University Libraries: Problems and Prospects, *International Library Review*, 10 (1978): 397-405.
2. *Eleven Librarians Visit China* (ed. by Diane Perushek), Association for Asian Studies *Committee on East Asian Libraries Bulletin*, 61 (February 1980): 55-64; 62 (June 1980): 45-53. My part was in the concluding section entitled *Problems Confronting Major Libraries*, 52-53.