

# **BOOKS IN MALAYSIA-SINGAPORE: VARIATIONS IN PERFORMANCE**

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## **Introduction**

Writing is by no means a new phenomenon in Malaysia and Singapore, however, the book publishing industry and the publishing function in the current context is most surely a recent cultural and intellectual phenomenon. Although one can generally conclude that print technology and culture came late to this area, it is also generally accepted that when it finally evolved, it had created a significant impact on the intellectual, social and cultural development of the countries. Colonization had also brought such countries into contact with Western civilization and gave them the opportunity to gain access to modern education in the nineteenth century. More specifically, it brought up the introduction of printing technology and the development and broadening of the educational base and growth of a reading public.

In studying the relatively unexplored areas of Malaysia-Singapore publishing, one has to proceed cautiously. Granted there are similarities of experience but there still exists important differences in culture, religion and tradition. It may be difficult to provide clear-cut answers, but as far as the researcher has seen, there are some mutual concerns that cut across the development of publishing in the two countries.

In general, the performance of the book trade sector in developing countries has been sluggish and lacking in priority. There were also problems that exist in the Asian contexts such as lack of reading habit and reading population, due to the agrarian tradition of being more at ease with oral traditions. Reasons for this sluggishness in the trade is difficult to understand and could be the subject of much debate. However a study of the formative years in Malaysian publishing history could help shed light on this situation.

## **Formative Years of Malaysian-Singapore Publishing**

Malaysia and Singapore and a certain extent, Indonesia, have cultural, historical and geographical ties. As we also know, Malaysia and Singapore share the same genesis, at least up to 1965. The two countries share the same important events in the development of the formative years in intellectual development and Singapore especially, was formerly a centre

for Islamic thought and cultural centre of the Malay world. Although the present population of Singapore is currently predominantly Chinese, its beginnings existed on its identity as a Malay province and was linked to Malay history as part of the British Straits Settlements. Asmah (1982,58) claims that among the legacies of the British colonial government, the most valuable is the English language. This encounter should have expedited the transfer of benefits of Western educational programs, but the Colonial Office (CO) made certain that their educational policy should still be "highly beneficial to British interests and British trade" (Kratoska and Baston 1992, 50). Therefore it is justified to claim that the slow rate of growth in modern Western education during colonial times had led to a sluggish development of an indigenous intellectual base for both Malaysia and Singapore. Whitehead (1989, 271) claims that the CO had actually carried out a basically static policy which became an "euphemism for excessive paternalism". For example, even when Malay vernacular education was introduced to fight illiteracy, it was not solely advocated in the interests of social development but more of social Darwinism, aimed to prepare the indigenous population to accept their place in colonial society (Andaya and Andaya 1982, 231).

It is sobering indeed to realize that from 1800 until decolonisation during the Second World War and Independence in 1957, very little was done to prepare the indigenous population to face the rapid expansion of science and technology in the Western world. In short, there was no major investment in education and intellectual service at the highest possible level which could ultimately contribute to the development of human resources within the local community. The role of education as intellectual agents of change for man and society was neglected.

In marked contrast, Japan for instance was comparatively free from colonial influence and was able to promote the country's literacy program even after contact with the West. Realizing the great benefits that could be reaped from the western knowledge industry, Meiji Japan introduced compulsory education in 1872 and by 1900 illiteracy was almost eradicated. The fact that Japan was far more populous and had a rich and sophisticated background had certainly contributed to this rapid literacy development. Minowa (1991, 143) for instance, argues that publishing take-off followed successful education policies by the Japanese and he had observed the same phenomenon in the case of the Germans. The Germans made education compulsory by 1780 and had introduced book clubs by that time.

### **Post-colonial State**

Book publishing in both countries began to emerge into its modern form beginning from the nineteenth century with the introduction of the Jawi script and later on the Rumi, the romanised Malay script. Any form of reading or study were conducted in face-to-face settings of religious instructions or oral-based traditions. This sphere of traditional religious studies was the basis of trends in memorization which blended very well into the lives of rural Malays. A majority of Malay writers have a rural background and were educated in the national language schools and write about progress and development and improving the Malay society.

On the English language front, the Malay states had become recipients of books and grants from missionary groups. There was also an influx of imported reading materials from Cairo, Mecca and Bombay. Local publishers turned to retailing and readily became stockist for books printed in places as far as Istanbul and Russia (Proudfoot 1993, 44).

By turning their attention to retailing, the indigenous publishers had indeed lost focus of their most crucial role, that of developing and producing locally written, printed and published books that could serve the newly-emergent and captive market. This period could prove to be a major turning point in the sense that books could then be enjoyed by the masses, whereas previously exclusive court texts were only enjoyed by the privileged classes. Since the 1920s, the Malay world had become recipients of mass-produced cultural products from abroad, a situation not unlike the present. The excessive flow of books from abroad followed the development of English education in Singapore and other cities of the Straits Settlements. This move created the market for textbooks from United Kingdom. The local trade was not able to compete with this massive influx and therefore could not charter the future development of the local publishing infrastructure or stimulating the knowledge and cultural industry.

After World War II, Britain was eager to avoid scrutiny and critique from outside the Empire especially from America and UNESCO (Whitehead 1987, 227). These two entities had advocated an egalitarian policy in education while the British had lapsed in their responsibility towards stimulating the local environment to create a pro-learning society which could lead to a pro-reading society which in turn could lead to a pro-book society. This situation could have, delayed the publishing take-off for this region.

The winds of change began after the founding of UNESCO in 1945 which immediately launched an international agenda to eradicate illiteracy and was devoted to fight the stark famine of books in the developing world (Behrstock 1991, 29). The British responded by establishing The British Council which was organized to help literary and education movements and independent Malaysia then became a major recipient of British Council aid and donation. The Malay states had become a major market for English books because the medium of instruction in the mainstream education system was English. Buchan (1992, 349) also considers the former colonies as natural marketplaces for British exports since local publishing houses had not been fostered to become producers of books. For instance in 1947, Donald Moore arrived in Singapore and became the representative for the Hodder & Stoughton group. He was to setup what may be the earliest agency house in the region. However this group later had overtrading problems and Moore had to sign his business to, among others, United Publishers and Eastern Universities Press, managed by Goh Kee Seah in Singapore (Attenborough 1975, 178).

Therefore the period between the 50s and 70s was marked by active involvement by British publishing houses. Singapore was made the main thrust and centre of activities while activities in Malaysia were mainly efforts taken in a second market. Sutcliffe (1978,284) maintained that the overseas branches of British houses were not more that stockist for the sale of books, especially by Oxford University Press (OUP) which actively pursued the lucrative textbook market. Indigenous publishers had to contend with the production of general books, mostly dime novels, short stories, and romances to feed a society just emerging out of illiteracy and neglect.

It is clear that Malaysia at the threshold of Independence remained underdeveloped as far as the indigenous book-related business is concerned while Singapore after the Separation began to develop its own literary identity. Rapid economic growth has made Singapore a thriving business centre for transnational companies. The Republic's economic programme has benefited the book trade tremendously in the sense that its readership possesses the buying power for quality and quantity in printed matter. Koh (1978, 100)

reported that due to long historical ties, large numbers of overseas publishers chose to appoint Singaporean agents on an exclusive basis to distribute their lists. Those agents are able to obtain the latest publications from overseas and distribute their stock to wholesalers and retailers all over the region. Most certainly these agents are given highly preferential discount rates and other benefits of dealing with overseas publishers. Here in lies the main turning point in the shared genesis of Malaysian-Singapore book trade. Since then both countries have taken different paths and like any developing nation, both have undergone several economic and social changes and as a result of these changes, the publishing scene for one, has become more differentiated.

## COUNTRY REPORT: MALAYSIA

### Introduction

During the 1950s and 1960s, the central question occupying the minds of the Malaysian government was about the laying of plans for the creation of a nation. The policy makers in time began to realize that education is the most important means of attaining both economic and social development and one of its instruments is books. Education and books are crucial contributors towards broader intellectual and technological purposes.

Malaysia from then on participated in major meetings and conferences held at international levels especially by UNESCO and the World Bank. The main thrust of action was to ensure the development of infrastructure and skills in the production and promotion of cultural productions, especially of literacy materials. The government promoted the role of books and reading in the enrichment of cultures, the achievement of literacy education and more importantly in this study, encouraging the development of publishing companies in developing countries. The emphasis was on boosting the efforts to promote book development and get rid of all the constraints and difficulties brought upon by the period of neglect.

Altbach (1984, 231) spells out the risks of continued cultural imperialism in the literature of the nation. He observes that a Third World publishing industry has special significance because it is there that books are urgently needed for education and more importantly, for the development of broader intellectual and development purposes. By the 60s the intellectual climate for action on book development was fully charged (Behrstock 1991, 32). The urgency to build a local publishing capacity is, according to Graham (1992,32), an entirely "postcolonial phenomenon" because none of the colonialists "fostered nascent publishing" in their midst.

UNESCO officials published a number of seminal studies detailing the book hunger in the developing world such as *Books for All* by R. E. Barker in 1956, *The Book Revolution* by R. E. Escarpit in 1966 and *The Book Hunger*, jointly authored by Baker and Escarpit in 1973. As for Malaysia, *The Statistical Yearbook* (UNESCO 1967, 390) presented a breakdown of titles as follows:

**Table 1**

Number of Titles published in Malaysia according to subject, 1966

Generalities	104
Philosophy	16

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## BOOKS IN MALAYSIA-SINGAPORE

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Religion	40
Social Sciences	67
Philology	91
Pure Sciences	88
Applied Sciences	66
Arts/Lit	197
Geog/Hist	55
<u>Total</u>	<u>724</u>

As shown in the above, the 60s showed an overall low of production. Altbach and McVey (1976, 86) suggested that in many Third World countries the conditions for intellectual life were not conducive to publishing and these societies were dependent on European languages and in economic terms, these countries rely upon Western producers of intellectual products.

Therefore in order to ensure the attainment of self-reliance and maximum use of national intellectual resources, Malaysia established its own national publishing agency, Dewan Bahasa & Pustaka (DBP) in 1959 and the National Book Development Council in 1967.

By and large the 60s could be seen as a period of trying to pave the way forward into the professional side of the book trade and by the 70s the Malaysian book trade organizations concentrated in the struggle to protect the interests of Malaysian publishers and upgrade the level of professionalism in the trade. Publishing management personnel hoped that eventually a strong publishing environment, editorial philosophy and management, modern production techniques and marketing can develop over the years. The economics of publishing in all its disciplines is beginning to take form in the nascent book publishing industry.

### **The Present Publishing Situation**

Altbach (1991,122) mentions the success stories of the publishing industry in parts of the so-called Third World such as Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan. Of course now these countries form part of the more advanced economy commonly referred to as the newly industrializing countries (Nics) or Newly Industrialised Economies (Nies) or more illustriously as the Asian Tigers. Malaysia is today considered as a developing country and is in process of industrial upgrading and diversification. Its VISION 2020 will propel the country into developed nation status by year 2020. In 1993, Malaysian GDP was about the same as New Zealand and Ireland (Othman 1993, 46) and it has maintained a growth rate of more than 8.5 per cent. Its population of about 20 million people has a literacy rate of about 82-84 per cent.

Since the illiteracy level in this country is low, the total market for books may be said to be virtually all people above a very young age. However this high percentage does not necessarily mean they are all potential buyers. The consumer market varies by age, education, social class and disposable income. An important factor to note here is that cultural products are not in the desired list of the Malaysian purchasing public although the generally fine

economy has improved the rate of disposable income among the public. There is generally a small demand from a community that regards reading and writing and other literary pursuits a relatively minor part of their lives although a great deal of attention is given to reading for schooling and academic purposes (Azizah 1996, 17).

Therefore the economic success and the equal distribution of learning opportunities that could have automatically launched publishing take-off has failed to materialize in the book scene in Malaysia, especially in its domestic market. The former Director General of DBP, Datuk Hassan Ahmad opined that this poor state in the readership is indicative of the state of underdevelopment in the indigenous book trade while Rustam and Rohani (New Straits Times, 1993) felt that the state of the book publishing industry is related to the intellectual environment of the nation. We still need to multiple our efforts towards ensuring a receptive reading environment and reading culture. Publishers and especially booksellers wish for more action on the part of the government to develop a wider readership of books, especially of general books. If such efforts succeed, local publishers will increase output of new titles and the number of print-runs.

### **The Malaysian Book Market**

According to Mansoor (1995, 2) the Malaysian book publishing industry has a turnover of approximately US\$282 million and it is primarily focused on the domestic market. The major output sectors are educational publishing which accounted for the almost 70 per cent of the local publishing activity, the rest being mostly publishers of general and children's books. The former President of the Malaysian Book Publishers Association (MABOPA), Mr. Hasrom Haron estimated a turnover of about RM250-400 million, out of which RM40 million are derived from sales of textbook (Ho 1992, 34). An estimated 10,000 personnel is involved in the trade producing an estimated 4000 titles annually, of which, 70 per cent are educational titles. The remaining 30 percent are general books, including literary and creative works, general knowledge books, children's books and books for higher learning institutions (Shaari, 1993).

The British book trade is an important industry because it produces nearly 68,000 new products in a year. The book market of the year 1991 was worth over 2.5 billion pounds at retail prices. Clearly books are an important aspect in the social, educational and cultural life of the country. Japan, for instance, has a publishing industry reported to be worth about US\$22 billion. The Japanese authorities claim that every woman, man and child is a reader, at least of magazines. In 1991, about 3,889 magazines were published. This success story could be due to the support from 120 million highly information-oriented people and their advanced technologies and superior management systems and other significant features such as their distributive systems, especially the role of the giant distributors. Tohan and Nippan.

**COUNTRY REPORT: SINGAPORE**

**Introduction**

Singapore has a population of about three million. The composition is made up to 77.5 per cent Chinese, 14.2 Malays, 7.1 per cent Indians and others (2.4 per cent). The island enjoys a literacy rate of 91.3 per cent. Although at a glance it would appear that Singapore does not have a large market, but its publishing industry is one of the successful ones in ASEAN. The Singapore book trade published extensively in English and Chinese, the two main languages on the Republic. Rightfully designated as one of the four Tigers the book industry has benefited from a forward-looking government. Economic strategies and an early commitment to education has contributed towards a significant growth in home markets, especially the emergence of the middle class, growth in literacy and educational pursuits and in the development of private enterprise publishing.

Efforts by government agencies have ensured a steady growth in the economy and provided environments conducive towards the cultural industry. For example, The Singapore Trade Development Board and the Economic Development Board have schemes to promote publishing and printing sectors (Gopinathan, 1996). Conscious efforts are undertaken to penetrate foreign markets and to exploit developments in globalisation and information technology. Perhaps this drive to expand comes from the realisation that the Singaporean market may prove to be small and could be marginalised.

It would seem that the efforts of government agencies in the 70s and 80s had contributed to steady growth in the publishing sector. It is true that long-term programmes should be planned and formulated. For instance, in 1970, the publishing and printing industry had a total of 165 premises producing a turnover of S\$2500 million. However in 1995 the number had increased to about 300-390 and in 1995 the publishing sector alone had a turnover of over \$960 million. The number of titles produced has grown from 269 books in all languages (English, Chinese, Malays, Tamil and others) in 1963 to 3711 in 1995 and it is likely to reach 5000 titles by the end of the decade.

However one other factor that has added to Singapore's success story is the fact that by and large, it has always enjoyed preferential treatment from the publishing world on a global scale. A number of large transnational publishing companies had long-standing arrangements with Singapore houses to distribute their lists on a rather exclusive basis. In fact a notable trend over recent years has been the entrance of well-established European names investing in Singapore. The German world-renowned medical publisher Springer-Verlag has moved in alongside International Thomson. This development could again change the overall performance of the domestic market. It could be an important stimulus to Singaporean publishing.

How does one explain variations in performance between two countries? Differences in the relative performance of the book trade sectors in the two countries are largely related to some key institutional factors, one of which is the socio-economic political factor. Both governments believe in focusing on strengthening national capabilities, capacities and infrastructures of the book trade. Both countries have National Book Development Councils committed towards mobilising human resources by supporting training programmes and encouraging innovations in the industry to improve production capabilities. (Refer Appendix I)

The Malaysian government has made repeated calls towards the promotion of self-

reliance and maximum use of national resources, however the government should also look into providing adequate technical, intellectual and administrative support, including, in particular political support and of course, adequate funding. For example, as part of the Government's plan to make Malaysia the educational and media centre of excellence, more books should therefore be published for the pursuit of intellect and cultivation of national creativity. The government could in this context give institutionalised backing like what it did towards the other industrial sectors.

The government could also look into the import and sale of not only printed matter from all over the industrialised world but also the wide-area hypermedia – the global hypermedia network. The flow of intellectual products from the West could continue to be detrimental to the local industries, not to mention our local customs, beliefs and way of life. Although all countries should adhere to the Florence Agreement guaranteeing the free flow of books between nations, the Government should think about reducing this over dependence on foreign cultural products. To date we have not been able to provide a data base on actual book imports, much less the explosion of the Web traffic!

### **The Emerging Future**

Marketers of products are always browsing around searching for new areas to exploit. We still have a long way to go in developing our own data bases and making maximum use of our national intellectual resources. However industrialised nations have not eased their hold over our markets, their search for new markets have always been targeted towards the lesser developed nations. Expansion into overseas markets had driven the first flow of foreign publishing houses. So, it would seem that flow of digital books and other information through the superhighway of the future is going to become the norm in the mid-90s and well into the next millennium.

Due to the relative openness of the Malaysian and I believe the Singapore economy to foreign investment and retailers, this flow has remained unmonitored and rather difficult to reverse. This openness must not be detrimental to the indigenous industries. The home markets are already too small and segmented to survive against such a global backdrop. Admittedly, the advanced communication infrastructure will bring about qualitative transformation in the thinking on book publishing and the so-called paperless society.

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Appendix 1

MSIA - SIN: BOOK TRADE AND RELATED ITEMS AT A GLANCE

	<u>MSIA</u>	<u>SIN</u>
Pop	20m	3m
GDP	8.5%	9.1%
Nat. Book Policy	available	na
Literacy rate	82%	92%
Annual Production	4000	3711
Types of books	Mainly textbooks	Mainly textbooks
Sales turnover	RM250-400m	S\$960m
Reading	half-a-page a year	3.2 books a year
Publishing houses	150 (120 active)	300
Expenditure on books	RM22.00 / year	na
Distributorship	Rep. for 420 foreigners	Main centre
Imports(printed/published)	US\$60m (books only)	S\$292.4m
Exports "	US\$7m ( " )	S\$492.4m
Nat/Interntl Book Fairs	Available	Available