

A COMMON TEXTBOOK OF COMPARATIVE LIBRARIANSHIP FOR SOUTHEAST ASIA LIBRARY SCHOOLS: A PROPOSAL AND RETHINKING

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Abstract

Due to dearth and obsolescence of teaching materials on ASEAN libraries and librarianship, the author proposes the writing of books that could be used as common textbooks for courses on comparative ASEAN librarianship. The textbooks should be comprehensive to cover traditional as well as current topics, written in English, by CONSAL librarians and/or LIS teachers and possibly published by CONSAL. It is hoped that through the textbooks, similarities and differences among libraries and librarianship are brought out and would lead subsequently to a better understanding of the general principles and practices of librarianship unique to the region.

INTRODUCTION

Many Asian librarians, who once studied in North America, UK, Australia, New Zealand and other countries, had wished, at one time or another, to write about librarianship in their country or about Southeast Asian librarianship. This urge to write is oftentimes stifled because many of the indigenous literatures are not available in the country where Asian librarianship is studied. If ever, these are in the forms of abstracts or indices. Some are available through various library networks and Web sites (for those who studied after mid 1990s), but many do not meet the Southeast Asian librarians' requirements to write about Southeast Asian librarianship. For example, some papers have been written about Indonesian librarianship and a few on other countries – considered good materials for comparative librarianship. However, not all of them are available through library networks. During his study days in the US, the author observed that while some Indonesian librarianship literatures are available at the Library of Congress (LC), these could not be accessed as LC was reluctant to work with some of its clients. Instead, LC normally suggests that one consults academic libraries that participated in the Southeast Asia (hereafter called SEA) program on documentation through Public Law 480. Moreover, for other works from the Southeast Asian region, even if these are available through interlibrary loan schemes, many could not be understood because these are written in the indigenous languages, or in local characters such as Thai publications. These are situations where many who would like to lecture on comparative librarianship in the region dreadfully avoids. Hardly any work on other

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Southeast Asian country library conditions could be found. As a teacher in a course in comparative librarianship (an elective) in an Indonesian library and information science (hereafter called LIS) school, I noticed that my students prefer to write on libraries from developed countries because numerous reference materials⁺ could be found than when one is interested in writing about libraries from Southeast Asian countries. Hence it is time to rethink ASEAN librarianship, specifically the production of teaching and learning materials on ASEAN comparative librarianship.

THE EXISTING PUBLICATIONS

In 1967, five SEA nations (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand) established what we now know as the Association of Southeast Asia Nations (hereafter called ASEAN) with mission to promote political and economic cooperation and stability in the region. In other words, it is a political, economic and cultural organization of countries located in Southeast Asia. From the original 5, membership increased to 10 nations after Brunei Darussalam, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia joined the association. Papua New Guinea has been admitted as an observer. The Jakarta-based-ASEAN-National-Secretariat established various instrumentalities to carry out its tasks. One of these is the ASEAN Committee On Culture and Information (COCI). Of interest to librarians is its programme on information and librarianship. COCI organizes annual meetings among ASEAN librarians for the purpose of exchanging ideas, experiences or opinions on librarianship. Venue of the meetings varies each year but usually in a national library of the host ASEAN country. Senior librarian(s) from country members meet and they are usually asked to present papers on pre-designated topics, followed by discussion and field visits. Proceedings and papers of such meetings are published, albeit not widely distributed. Among the proceedings are : Chan Tsai Ching (ed.). *Introduction to ASEAN Librarianship : Library Computerization*. (1993), Jaafar, Shara Banun ... [et al.] (eds). *Introduction to ASEAN Librarianship : Special Libraries*. 1993., Soekarman and Wardaya, S.S (eds.) . *Introduction to ASEAN Librarianship : School Libraries*. 1992., Loreto M. Serina, (ed.) *Proceedings of the National Seminar on the Promotion of Reading Habits in the Philippines*, Soekarman (ed.) *Proceedings of The Regional Seminar on the Promotion of Reading Habit by ASEAN libraries*. 1995.

Prior to the above-mentioned COCI publications, there have been articles published on ASEAN comparative librarianship. These are mainly presented at the Conference of Southeast Asian Librarians (CONSAL) held every three years. Also there have been published papers on ASEAN comparative librarianship but their scopes are limited to one or two countries, for example, Oyler's *Library Education, Southeast Asia and Simmons* which is limited to Simmons College and Vietnam experience or Indonesia-Netherlands relationship that includes librarianship. Moreover, works that were published from the early 1980s or mid 1990s had dispersed topics, not necessarily reflecting comparative librarianship in the ASEAN region. Many new issues such as Internet, Web sites, digital libraries are not covered by these publications. Hence it is

⁺ The terms material, works, documents and literature are used interchangeably in this paper.

time to produce a textbook on ASEAN comparative librarianship. The justifications for a new work on ASEAN comparative librarianship is that (1) some existing books from 1980s and 1990s are perhaps obsolete by this time, (2) many new topics are yet to be covered by the existing books, (c) the textbook should be based on topics rather than on the region, and (d) the textbook should cover all ASEAN nations which means 10 nations with various cultural, social, and technical backgrounds.

OBSTACLES TO WRITING A COMMON TEXTBOOK ON ASEAN COMPARATIVE LIBRARIANSHIP

At this early stages of the 21st century, there are several obstacles that may impede the study of ASEAN comparative librarianship. Some of these are:

(1) The increasing number of publications from the 1990's onwards. From the late 1980s and early 1990s many works have been published although some of them are in the form of what we call grey literatures. In Indonesia, for example, Tairas (1991) listed 178 entries on Indonesian librarianship and eleven years later Marzuki (2002) listed 78 more titles not included in the Tairas' list. It is presumed that this increase may have occurred also in other ASEAN countries.

(2) The rise of Websites. Although no one knows exactly the total number of Websites, it is assumed that there is an increase of Websites specially dedicated to library and information matters. Some are in the form of group discussions, others as open access journals and still others by any other form like blogs. In the case of Indonesia, perhaps the largest discussion group for Indonesian librarians is ics_yahoo group that started in 1990 with more than 600 participants. As we all know, there is no bibliographic control yet to Websites.

(3) The still dominant vernacular (local) literature. Although English is the first foreign language taught in primary and secondary schools in some countries (Indonesia, Thailand) it is always not easy to write in English. For other countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, Philippines, Brunei Darussalam where English is almost the *lingua franca* or even *lingua franca*, there are great probabilities that writing in English in these countries is not so difficult compared to an Indonesian writing in the English language. It is debatable whether literature on ASEAN country members are predominantly in the English or vernacular languages but for countries such as Indonesia and perhaps Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia, the literatures on librarianship are decidedly more numerous in the vernacular (local) languages than in English. For example, of the 78 new publications on librarianship in Indonesia, all are written in Bahasa Indonesia. In the *Index of Indonesian Learned Periodicals*, only 10% of the whole articles are written in English while the remaining ones are in Bahasa Indonesia. Only *Baca*, a journal published by the Indonesian Scientific Information Centre (Pusat Dokumentasi Informasi Ilmiah) Indonesian Institute of Sciences publishes its articles in English as well as in Bahasa Indonesia. In order to overcome language difficulties, there was an agreement among SEA librarians in the early 1970s to translate the titles of articles written in the

vernacular languages into English. The purpose is to aid in the indexing and abstracting (hereafter called I & A) of these journal articles. For example:

Peranan pelayanan perpustakaan Daerah Sumatera Utara dalam meningkatkan minat baca di kalangan siswa SMU di Kotamadya Medan
(Role of library service in North Sumatra in improving reading interest in Upper Secondary School students in Medan Municipality)

Pengalaman membangun system automasi Provinsi Kalimantan Timur
(Experience in building automation system in the province of East Kalimantan)

(4) While some topics need revision, others are new and not yet covered by the existing documents. The literature on comparative librarianship produced by COCI or other authors are from 1970s until early 1990s or late 1980s and considered rather obsolete for the readers of 2000s. Many topics are never covered by any document published after the 1990s such as digital libraries, Web sites, information literacy, etc.

(5) The need to recompile existing documents. Some papers on ASEAN comparative librarianship have been produced, disseminated either in print or electronic formats. Among the documents are those presented at a seminar on library and information education in Asia Pacific conducted in Kuala Lumpur in 2001 and 2003, the papers read during the scholarly meetings in Brunei Darussalam such as Conference on New Information Technology, Virtual Information the Dawn of a New (Brunei Darussalam 2001), Conference on Information Resources Integration, an Agenda for Change (Brunei Darussalam, 2002), Role of National Library in the Knowledge-Based-Society (Thailand 2005) and various seminars. Although not all of the papers exclusively dealt with the comparative aspects of ASEAN librarianship still others contain some aspects of the subject.

(6) Emphasis on local experience so that librarians from other countries could learn from their colleagues as well as exchange experiences. For example, the mobile library services in Thailand possess some similarities with Indonesia's floating libraries, back packers or bicycle libraries.

THE CURRICULUM

The comparative librarianship course usually appears under various names in the curriculum of library and information science schools in ASEAN countries. If ever offered, it is only an elective course; none among the schools in the region considers it a required course. In Indonesia, the course is not listed in the national curriculum for undergraduate and graduate programmes as devised by the Directorate General of Higher Education. Perhaps the same situation also happens in other countries. With the lack of required courses on comparative librarianship with special emphasis in ASEAN library matters, many LIS students in the region are not aware or do not know the library situations in Southeast Asia countries. On the other hand, because of the abundance of

librarianship literatures on advanced countries, students could cite easily various aspects of library conditions in developed countries⁺, for example US or UK. For those of us who have studied in developed countries, we found how easy to locate sources on the country, even at the provincial level. There is a lot of difference in the SEA regions where finding sources is a real struggle. For lecturers on comparative librarianship, the experience of getting works on other ASEAN countries is a nightmare. Let me tell you of an experience I and a fellow student had during our post-graduate studies in the United States in early 1990s. We were designing a course on ASEAN comparative librarianship, particularly public librarianship with special emphasis on ASEAN countries. We had nightmares and frustrations as we gather documents on ASEAN public libraries which are nearly non-existent in Indonesia. It was even harder to get literatures from the national libraries and if ever available, many of them were published in non-English languages (read vernacular languages) which we could not understand. My concern today is that the library and information science students enrolled in library schools in the ASEAN region know better about libraries in USA, UK or Australia rather than those in Malaysia or Thailand or Vietnam! This is really ironically shameful!

Such do not jibe well with the ASEAN missions of, among others, promoting better understanding among country members. Thus, it is an opportune time to write or publish a textbook on ASEAN comparative librarianship. Although the course comparative librarianship is not compulsory in (almost) all LIS schools, at least, it could be incorporated in various courses. Topic concentration should be common to all.

THE PROPOSED COMMON TEXTBOOK(S)

The author proposes the writing of common textbook(s) on ASEAN comparative librarianship with the following features:

First, it should be written by ASEAN authors. Although not a xenophobic person and with due respect to expatriate experts and consultants, the author suggests that the textbooks should be written by indigenous authors who know all aspects of libraries and librarianship in their respective countries. It does not look good that as is happening today, foreign experts or consultants write about librarianship of countries or regions that they know little about. Two weeks or one month observation and research is not enough for a foreigner to produce a textbook that would truly reflect country or regional situations. For the would-be-comparative-librarianship- textbook authors, they could be practicing librarians or academicians or a combination of both.

Second, the textbook should be written in English. While we understand English pretty well, writing or speaking it is another matter. While this may not be true in Singapore or Philippines where English seems to be the first language of many, it is not so in Indonesia and other ASEAN countries where the native languages are used not only as medium of instructions but also used in day to day transactions be they personal or

⁺ Defined as income per capita US \$10,000 or more (*Time*, October 2005)

business. Although many of us are graduates from English-speaking-LIS schools, we have not been used to writing and speaking English after we are back in our respective countries as English is not the lingua franca even if it is the first foreign language. The advantage of an ASEAN comparative librarianship textbook written in English is that it could be used and understood by many and thus becomes useful not only in any ASEAN country but throughout the English speaking world. Books published in English means a wider audience and greater chance of selling than those published in the vernacular languages.

Third, the textbook should be published and hopefully marketable! It should be printed not like the various COCI proceedings that were produced in photocopies. The publisher could be from anywhere. If this is not possible, perhaps the CONSAL Secretariat General should take the cudgels.

Fourth, the topics should incorporate traditional as well as contemporary issues. The traditional topics may include type of libraries (school, special, academic, public, national), cataloguing and classification, national bibliography, LIS curriculum, library co-operation, while the contemporary ones may be library automation, digital libraries, information networks, information literacy, etc.

Fifth, utilize the existing literature published in vernacular languages as well as those in other languages especially English. List of references and reading materials should include not only vernacular literatures but also English as well as other foreign languages that may be found anywhere, either from I & A services, print or electronic formats, or from various Web sites.

The teaching of common topics in ASEAN comparative librarianship should not be limited to a specific course but may be incorporated and expanded in other related courses. For example, a discussion on digital libraries in general should not be limited to conditions obtaining in developed countries but may be made more interesting and fruitful if situations in the ASEAN countries can be incorporated in the discussion, too. The common textbook may then come in handy as a complementary material for the teaching of digital libraries not only in the advanced countries but in ASEAN countries as well. The same method may be used in teaching other topics. Thus, the proposed common textbook could enhance better understanding of librarianship and information work among LIS students in the ASEAN countries.

REMARKS

The published works on ASEAN librarianship which are mentioned somewhere in this paper can be updated and expanded with the writing of new textbooks on ASEAN comparative librarianship, covering all topics, written by ASEAN authors that could serve as a common textbook in ASEAN LIS schools. The textbook could be used either as a common textbook on comparative librarianship or as a supplement to other topic-based courses. It is hoped that with the publication of a common textbook on ASEAN comparative librarianship covering various topics, understanding and gaining experiences

among the ASEAN LIS students as well as the librarians could be improved and strengthened. This is one project where ASEAN librarians can contribute in the fulfilment of the ASEAN mission.

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