Historical Documents on the Chinese in Southeast Asia: Digitization and Collection Development in the NUS Libraries

Abstract

The Chinese Library of NUS Libraries has a growing unique collection of historical documents on the Chinese in Southeast Asia. To preserve and share this research collection of primary and secondary materials with scholars worldwide, NUS Libraries had undertaken a project in 2004, to digitize the documents in our collection, as well as those in other organizations. Access to this collection is via the website, Historical Documents of the Chinese in Southeast Asia.

The project not only achieved the primary aims of preserving and sharing of a special collection with international scholars but provided the much needed publicity to attract potential donors from the public and the scholarly community. Viewing the collection online had prompted some to offer their personal works to us voluntarily. It also made it easier when persuading others to donate their private collections or loan their collections for digitization. Most importantly, it helped attract donors to offer monies to help fund our acquisitions effort in this area. This paper will provide a description of the website and our experiences in digitizing the collection. We will also share how our collection development effort benefited from the launch of this website to the public.

Introduction

Over the years, the NUS Libraries have initiated several digitization projects to support its strategic goal of providing convenient and timely access to our collection for our users. They include Digital Media Gallery, examination papers and creating selected ebooks from our print collection. Among the seven special libraries in the NUS Libraries system, the Chinese Library is one of the first to digitize

its collection. One of the digitization projects carried out by the Chinese Library is digitizing the historical documents on the Chinese in Southeast Asia and making them available via the internet.

This paper will first introduce NUS Chinese Library and its Southeast Asian Chinese Collection. It will then trace the development of our digitization project of historical documents on Chinese in Southeast Asia, followed by a description of the website that contains these historical documents, and then discuss the benefits on collection development efforts from launching this website to the public.

**NUS Chinese Library and its Southeast Asian Chinese Collection**

NUS Chinese Library is one of the special libraries within the NUS Libraries System. It was established in 1953, with an aim to support the teaching and research needs of the Chinese Studies Department of the former University of Malaya founded in the same year. Currently, the Chinese Library has a collection of more than 550,000 volumes of Chinese and Japanese materials. It is one of the largest library resources of its kind in the Southeast Asian region. Its collection of 490,000 volume of Chinese materials is comparable with some of the Chinese academic collection in the United States. Outside of China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, the Chinese Library ranks after the Library of Congress (over 1,010,000 volumes) and Harvard Yenching Library (over 675,000 volumes)

Chinese Library has placed much emphasis on collecting Chinese materials published in or about Southeast Asia. Of special note are the commemorative publications by Chinese clan associations, Chinese schools, trade unions and religious institutions in Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Philippines as well as Indonesia.

The Chinese Library also has a comprehensive collection of Chinese newspapers published in Southeast Asia, in print as well as in microform. The collection has a total of 221 ceased and 22 current Chinese newspapers, which include microfilm of the first Chinese newspaper published outside China, the *Chinese Monthly Magazine* (察世俗每月统记传, 1815-1822); Singapore’s earliest Chinese newspapers, *Lat Pau* (叻报, 1887-1932); Thailand’s longest running Chinese
newspaper, *Sing Sian Yit Pao* (星暹日报 1959-). It has a total of 145 titles from Singapore, 57 from Malaysia, 11 from Philippines, 10 from Indonesia, 8 each from Vietnam and Thailand, and 2 each from Cambodia and Brunei. These are the most valuable primary resources for conducting research on Chinese people in this region.

**First Digitization Initiative -- Lat Pau**

While we continue to build up this print collection, we were also very concerned about the preservation of these valuable materials. Some of the materials published in late-19th century and early 20th century are so brittle that access to them must be severely restricted. In view of this situation, a Microfilm Unit was set up in the 1950s to microfilm pre-war Singapore and Malaysia newspapers.

Although the historical documents in microfilm have improved accessibility, we knew some of them had been neglected and under utilized because potential users were unaware of them. In addition, overseas researchers of major research institutions had to travel a long way to view the original materials or the microfilm copies in our library. These issues together with the fact that materials awaiting microfilming were so fragile that access to them have had to be strictly controlled meant that we had to look to digitization to address the issues of awareness, access and preservation.

The digitization of library materials has advanced rapidly over the last 20 years. It is now possible to digitize almost every format and medium presently held by libraries. Distance is therefore no barrier to accessing online digitized documents. As long as users have access to the Internet, they can view these materials from anywhere in the world.

Although it has become a fashion to undertake digitization projects to preserve cultural heritage, we were mindful that it was “an expensive and time-consuming process”, and that it was impossible to digitize all the important cultural records in our collection. Hence, we had to be extremely selective when deciding on

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the documents to be digitized. ³ The first title that appeared so vividly in our minds for digitization was none other than *Lat Pau*. *Lau Pau* met all the 3 factors spelt out by Anderson and Maxwell when selecting items for digitization: the uniqueness of the material, the demand for it and its physical fragility.⁴ *Lau Pau* was the first Chinese daily newspaper published in Singapore and began publication in December 1881. It ran for 52 years before it finally ceased publication in March 1932, making it the longest running Chinese daily in pre-war Singapore.⁵ *Lat Pau* was therefore an invaluable historical source for research into pre-war Singapore as well as the Chinese overseas. Unfortunately, earlier issues of the newspaper were completely lost, and the issues in the NUS Chinese Library covered only the period from 19 August 1887 to 31 March 1932.

*Lat Pau* was always in great demand by researchers working on Singapore in the late-19th to early-20th century. In order to preserve this valuable primary material and meet pressing demand by the users, a plan was developed to fund the digitization of the newspaper using the microfilm copies. In 1998, the digitization work for *Lat Pau* was carried out by Kodak (Singapore) Pte Ltd and the digitized *Lat Pau* made available on the Internet in January 2000.

⁴ Ibid.
Moving Forward -- Historical Documents on the Chinese in Southeast Asia Project

The positive response received from both local and international researchers on the Lat Pau digitization project encouraged us to further digitize more historical materials with Southeast Asian content. An ambitious project to digitize historical documents of research value and relevant to the study of the Chinese in Southeast Asia was proposed by the Chinese Library in 2004 and supported by the library’s senior management. The project aimed to preserve valuable fragile primary source materials, and at the same time provide convenient access to these documents especially to researchers and students.

The project will not only include the historical documents of research value from the NUS Libraries collection but also incorporate historical documents from other organizations and individuals. Primary sources such as newspapers, magazines, commemorative publications, school magazines, textbooks, manuscripts, travel and descriptions, and private correspondences will be given priority. Secondary materials such as important historical writings by Chinese authors in Southeast Asia which are out of print and had not been widely circulated before will also be included. As far as possible, only non-copyrighted materials will be included in the project. It is expected that at the end of this project, a representative full-text database of historical documents on the Chinese in Southeast Asia will be established. A brochure on the project was produced to create awareness of the project, and as part of a fundraising effort.

The documents on the Chinese in Southeast Asia kept in the Chinese Library are huge. In this respect, the project was divided into a few phases. We planned to focus on digitizing the documents that provide historical information on Southeast Asian Chinese as well as documents on Singaporean Chinese and Malaysian Chinese in the first 6 years which we aimed to complete by 2009. In order to cut down on the cost, materials that are in better physical condition will be handled in house. Only materials that requiring special handling such as materials in microfilm, fragile materials and thread-bound Chinese books are outsourced to external vendors.
Digitization Done by External Vendor

Digitization Done In-house
HDCSEA Website

The Historical Documents on the Chinese in Southeast Asia (HDCSEA) website (http://www.lib.nus.edu.sg/cht/SEAChinese/index.html) was launched in March 2007 after representative digitized historical documents on the Chinese in Southeast Asia were created. The website contains an introduction to the NUS Libraries Digitization Project, two local Chinese newspapers of the late-19th and early-20th century, namely the Lat Pau and the Sin Kok Min Jit Pao (新国民日报, 1919-1933), and 40 documents on Chinese migration to Southeast Asia especially to Singapore and Penang. The website also includes biographies, individual works, periodicals, manuscripts and school publications of the early-20th century.

After the initial launch, the HDCSEA website was further expanded by including documents on the ancient kingdoms of Southeast Asia, extracts from the Chinese historical works on overseas travel (交通史籍), travel accounts on Southeast

Asia and survey reports. Three newspapers, namely the Sun Poo (星洲晨报), Chong Shing Yit Pao (中兴日报) and Penang Sin Peo (槟城新报), as well as 79 school commemorative publications were added after the initiate launch. The documents on the ancient kingdoms of Southeast Asian were extracted from the biographies sections (列传) in the Standard Histories of China. The biographies section in these dynasties histories dealt with a variety of famous individuals and also with the affairs of the various non-Han peoples and Southeast Asian peoples.

The extracts from these Chinese historical works on overseas journeys and travel accounts on Southeast Asia provided background information on some Southeast Asian countries. The historical works added in this website include Record of Buddhist Kingdoms (佛国记), Gazetteer of the Barbarian Countries in the Western Oceans (西洋蕃国志), On the Eastern and Western Ocean (东西洋考), and Gazetteer and Maps of the Maritime World (海国图志). The travel accounts were mostly selected from Geographic Notes from the Xiaofanghu Studio (小方壶斋舆地丛钞). It is a series which brought together several hundred individual Qing dynasty’s travel accounts and geographic notes.

Users can also access these historical documents via our library catalogue. Hyperlinks are inserted in the bibliographic records to allow users to access them by simply following the links.
The current website contains only image documents which are not searchable. We were unable to convert these image documents into searchable and editable electronic documents as the current OCR technology is not able to capture them accurately. We will continue to monitor the OCR technology and convert them once the technology is available.

We planned to add more historical documents, such as pre-World War II Southeast Asian Chinese newspapers and commemorative publications in the next phase.

**Benefits on Collection Development from the Launch of HDCSEA Website**

The launch of the HDCSEA website not only achieved the primary aim of preservation and sharing of a special collection with international scholars, but also, to our surprise, provided the much needed publicity to attract potential donors from the public and the scholarly community.

Posting these historical documents on the Chinese in Southeast Asia online have not only increased our public visibility and led to the increased usage of our Southeast Asian collection but also prompted institutions and individuals to offer their publications or collections to us voluntarily. The Chinese Library collection had always been enriched by donations from the public regularly over the years. With the launch of the HDCSEA website, we have received a total of 557 titles on Chinese Overseas Studies and Southeast Asian Studies from March 2007 to February 2008, an increase of 17% over the previous period. The publications received included published academic works on Chinese Overseas Studies and Southeast Asian Studies, literary works by Southeast Asia’s Chinese authors as well as commemorative publications from Chinese clan associations and Chinese religious institutions in Singapore and Malaysia. We hope that this upward trend will continue.

The HDCSEA website has assisted us in persuading others to donate or loan their collections for digitization as illustrated below.
The children of Mr Chua Boon Hean (蔡文玄 1905-1995), a famous Singapore writer and film script consultant in the late 1920s to the early 1970s, agreed to donate screenplays and literary works collected by his late father after viewing the collection online last year. This private collection of over 2000 volumes included some rare Chinese local gazetteers, literary works and 538 screenplays. These screenplays were collected by Mr Chua when he worked as the Head of the Chinese Department of the Shaw Organization.\(^7\) They are invaluable resources for the research on Shaw Organisation as well as the 20th century Chinese film industry in Hong Kong, Malaysia, Shanghai and Singapore.

We were unable to digitize *Chao Foon* (蕉风), an influential Chinese literary magazine published during the 2nd half of the 20th century because it was under copyright protection. We approached the Mahua Literature Resource Centre to assist us with the copyright clearance since they were the current publisher of the magazine. When the Centre saw the good work we did with the HDCSEA website, it not only helped us to obtain the necessary copyright clearance but it lent us about 40 issues of *Chao Foon* that were not part of our collection. As a result of the cooperation between the Centre and the Chinese Library, we were now able to provide the complete run of *Chao Foon* online to the great benefit of interested scholars and researchers.

Most importantly, the website also helped to attract donors to fund our acquisitions effort in Southeast Asian studies. One of our existing donors has expressed an interest in increasing his annual donation in developing a specific topic on Southeast Asian studies after viewing the website. He hoped that this collection will allow NUS Libraries to become the preferred destination of scholars working on this topic. We have proposed to him to fund the purchasing and microfilming of selected Southeast Asian Chinese newspapers. We are delighted that he has accepted in principle the proposal.

\(^7\) The Shaw Organisation is a film distribution company and movie theater chain founded by Runme Shaw and Run Run Shaw in 1924 in Singapore. Together they built a chain of more than 200 cinemas in Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong, as well as a huge film studio in the colony.
Another regular user of our Southeast Asian Collection has also generously agreed to financially support the digitization project after she viewed the HDCSEA website. Her generous donation has allowed us to speed up the project by outsourcing more historical documents to external vendors for digitization. We hope to receive more of such donations to fund our acquisitions and digitization effort.

Conclusion

Our experience in digitizing historical documents on the Chinese in Southeast Asia and allowing them to be shared online with scholars and institutions worldwide has taught us that digitization has benefits beyond improved accessibility and protecting the original documents from excessive handling and repeated copying. The project has provided much needed publicity to attract potential donors to give their publications to the Library or to fund our acquisition and digitization effort. In this respect, we have learnt that a visible product says more than a thousand words. Having a virtual product to demonstrate to our potential donors proved to be more effective than just a descriptive brochure. We were least successful when a brochure was used to appeal for donations.

Finally the project allowed us to pull in collections from other institutions into our digitization project and make them available via HDCSEA website. Hence, digitizing unique materials in the library collection can be an important component of an institution’s collection development strategy.

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