

THE PENANG LIBRARIES – PAST, PRESENT & FUTURE

Dr. Anwar Fazal

ABSTRACT

This paper is based on a presentation made at The Penang Story Seberang Perai Lecture held at the Penang Public Library Corporation, Seberang Perai, Penang on 23 November 2015, organised by the Penang Heritage Trust (PHT) and sponsored by Think City Sdn. Bhd. It looks at the development of libraries in Penang over the years.

Keywords: Libraries; Penang; History; Penang Library

INTRODUCTION

My idea of Heaven is a library and I am so happy I work out of one, which contains some 10,000 books and archives of 50 years of public interest activism. Today, I am even happier to be speaking in the Penang Library, one with a great history and a part of my life.

Let me begin with some stories.

Firstly, I was always inspired by books and my father who shared that love told me, the eldest, about the great libraries of the Islamic World. He reminded me that the Holy Quran starts with the word “Read” and a great Hadith of the Holy Prophet, Muhammad (SAW) which stated “Seek knowledge even to China for it”. I found out about one of the greatest libraries of Al Aziz (975-96) in Old Cairo in Egypt. It contained 1,600,000 volumes of which 6,500 concerned the mathematics sciences and 18,000 dealt with philosophy. There was also a huge “mappa mundi” (world map) of blue silk showing the continents, the oceans, mountains, rivers, roads and holy places and other sites with their names written in characters of gold. Around that same time, also in Old Cairo, Al Hakim (995-1021) set up another library of 600,000 volumes that he called the “Palace of Knowledge”.

Secondly, it was in 1948 in the little town of Taiping (which means “everlasting peace” and where I spent my first 16 years) that my father bought a copy of an amazing and unforgettable book that was the “Wikipedia” of those times – the Pears Cyclopaedia. It had nearly a thousand pages of small print covering over twenty domains on everything you needed to know from ancient history to biographies to modern science, from myths to ideologies to religion, from

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symbols to grammar to maps, from gardening to cooking to measurement and more. I have kept that book all my life and also some of its updates. When they published their Centenary Edition in 2002, I wrote to them saying that they had spelt “George Town”, the capital of Penang, Malaysia, as one word and that was wrong. The popular publisher, Penguin, had taken over the Cyclopedica and they thanked me and informed me that the editor had agreed to make the correction. It was nice to be able to correct a Cyclopedica!

Thirdly, Penang, nearly two centuries ago, in 1817, appeared as an extensive and informative entry in the Encyclopedia Britannica, probably at that time, the most valued knowledge resource in English, a first of its kind. I have made that historic entry into a poster which I give as a gift to friends of Penang and its knowledge heritage. My present to my family of six younger siblings after I graduated in 1964 and started work was to buy our home a set of the Encyclopedia Britannica. It was my gift for my family’s support for me, the eldest, to study at the University of Malaya. It was there when I was the President of the University of Malaya Student Union (UMSU) that I initiated my first library and reading room, the Goffard Library funded by the Asia Foundation and named after one of their representatives who had tragically died in Indonesia around that time. Since then, every major organisation that I have initiated, or worked with, has had a vibrant library. Among the organisations are the Consumers Association of Penang (CAP), Pesticide Action Network (PAN), the International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN), the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action (WABA) and the International Organisation for Consumers Union (IOCU). The latter was the documentation resource centre on consumer issues for the whole world. I have not stopped since. And as some of you may know, my own office is a library with too many books covering all my multiverse interests and even more as it includes my hobby as the self appointed head of the “International Book Rescue Mission” – scouring for good books which are sadly discarded as orphans and refugees and try finding loving homes for them!

THE ROARING SIXTIES AND SEVENTIES

When I joined the City Council of George Town in 1965, fifty years ago, I had the opportunity to organise their great collection of professional books and nearly two hundred global journals. I also had the honour to manage the oldest library in Malaysia, the Penang Library. I was the Secretary of the Management Committee and also the Supervisor of the Library for several years, as it had no professional librarian. I arranged with the British Council to fund a person to study Librarianship. That was a teacher, Thomas Samy, who after he finished his contract, moved to Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). The Chairman of the Library was Tuan Haji S.M. Mohd. Idris, then a member of the hyperactive elected City Council and now the President of the Consumers Association of

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Penang (CAP). He played a key role together with my predecessor, Mr. J.C. Rajarao, also then with the City Council, an outstanding scholar, a courageous rebel for justice and a sadly insufficiently recognised son of Penang. He later moved to the Rubber Research Institute. We did some great things together in the sixties and early seventies to make the Penang Library a community force. I would like to mention five of the transformational actions:

1. The operating hours were changed to become people friendly from “office hours” to later in the evening and also opening on the weekends, including Sundays. That was a marketing revolution as the library became more popular.
2. A dedicated Sixth Form Section was started. Dr. Toh Kin Woon, one of our leading public interest figures and intellectuals who lived with his humble washerwoman mother in a crowded place in Green Hall, opposite the Court, was a beneficiary and he told me many times the difference the Library made to his life. He later even became the Chairman of the Penang Public Library Corporation while serving as an elected Executive Council Member of the State Government of Penang.
3. Regular art exhibitions were organised for many young and aspiring artists to have their shows there. The illustrious Mr. Koay Soo Kau of Seni Mutiara Art Gallery on Lebuah Armenian, arguably the best gallery in town, had his first two exhibitions there. Young artists were celebrated and they donated a painting to the Library to build its collection.
4. Regular public lectures on public interest issues were held and some of the organisations that were active out of the library were:
 - The Consumers Association of Penang (CAP), which even had its office there briefly after it was founded in 1969 under the auspices of the University of Malaya’s Graduate Society.
 - The Society for Contemporary Affairs and the Penang Writers Circle where the late poet, Lee Kok Liang and Dato’ Dr. Ghulam Sarwar, one of our great scholars and book advocates, were pioneers. Dr. Ghulam later became the Secretary of the Library, taking over from me.
5. The Penang Library’s “Rare Books” Room was very special and was promoted to researchers. It had really historic materials and also the valuable James Richardson Logan collection. The Library suffered during the Second World War’s bombings and lost important materials. It still has many treasures and probably the greatest one is a Bible translated into Malay, printed by Oxford University’s printers and published by the East India Company in 1667 (Interestingly, Malay, or the Malayan language as it was called, became the first language into which the Bible was translated outside of Europe and the Middle East). Interestingly, this special initiative of the English East India Company

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was not mentioned in “The History of the Translation of the Bible into Bahasa Malaysia” by Robert Hunt, published by the Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (JMBRAS), Volume 62, Part 1, 1989. It is a great story awaiting a good writer to explore the background, motives, interpretations and translations.

THE OTHER LIBRARIES IN PENANG.

The history of the pioneering library movement in Penang would not be complete without the mention of the following other library initiatives in Penang:

1. The Butterworth Free Library, hosted at the St. Marks School started in 1954, arguably the first real free public library in this country and an interesting combination of a public and school library. It was a great pioneering model which sadly, because of lack of support of the local authorities, was allowed to die a slow death.
2. The start of the Universiti Sains Malaysia’s (USM) library in the Penang Campus led by Edward Lim Huck Tee who became a regional leader in library development became an important knowledge catalyst. He was so good that Monash University tasked him to lead their outstanding library. Edward Lim was also the author of the classic 1970 book, “Libraries in West Malaysia and Singapore”, his postgraduate thesis which was published by the University of Malaya, interestingly by a grant from the Perak Turf Club based in Ipoh. I was also blessed that my sister, Rashida Begum, later became the Chief Librarian of USM and President of the Librarians Association of Malaysia.
3. There was the United States Information Service (USIS) in “India House” in Beach Street which was also very popular. The British Council too had a very useful library including regular popular film screenings. It moved from the High Court house to Bishop Street and later, to Green Hall, Weld Quay and now, Light Street.
4. School libraries were also thriving. The Penang Library and the University of Malaya’s Graduate Society together with the Malaysian Library Association organised pioneering training programme for managing school libraries. I headed that initiative and we were keen that they also double as community libraries. Sadly, we could not get people to think out of the box!

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Some of the more significant recent developments include the following:

1. There were two great bibliographies done in Penang, both by Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM): The, “Bibliography of Penang”, by Tong Suit Chee, printed in 1974, and the other, “History of Penang: A Selected & Annotated Bibliography”, by Joceline Tan Poh Choo, printed in 1991.

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Joceline Tan is now with The Star Newspaper. Both are great resources for researchers and certainly needing updating and digitalization.

2. The Penang Library Network was a great pioneering digital initiative that linked all major libraries in Penang. One click and you can find who has the book in Penang. Sadly, the operation seems to be in a limbo.
3. The Penang Library's move from place to place in the last century needs to be recorded carefully, architecturally and photographically. It moved from the Town Hall to the High Court building in 1905, to Dewan Sri Pinang in 1972. Subsequently, with Federal support, the Penang Public Library Corporation (the new statutory body that took over the Penang Library which operated as a "Society") moved, as many Federal projects did, from the island to the new township of Seberang Perai in the mainland. Now there are branches in Scotland Road in George Town and in several townships such as Balik Pulau, Jawi, Bukit Mertajam and Bertam. In the process, the City of George Town did lose a knowledge heritage, plucked out of its history in the downtown UNESCO World Heritage Site.
4. An excellent chapter on the detailed early history of the Penang Library had been excellently written recently by Marcus Langdon in his encyclopedic work, "Penang: The Fourth Presidency of India, 1805 – 1830, Volume two: Fire, Spice & Edifice".
5. There was also once a detailed plan for the Library in the early 1970s to move to the former Maternity Hospital in Macalister Road. It was a trust property managed by the City Council. Unfortunately, it did not materialise as the Dewan Sri Pinang was made available.
6. A further effort was made seven years ago to set up a special library dedicated to Penang in that same building, together with USM. We called it the "Penang Palace of Knowledge" ("Istana Ilmu Pulau Pinang"). Sadly, it did not materialise and the historic building was now leased instead to the Penang Museum.

THE FUTURE

What of the future? How do we make the unique bicentennial of the Library in 2016/2017 another opportunity for a surge in Penang's knowledge history? There are two important dates, 8 October 1816 being the date it was institutionally established through a public meeting, and 1 January 1817 being the date it was opened to the public. I would like to make seven suggestions:

1. Research and print a comprehensive history of the 200 years of the Penang Library.
2. Hold an International Conference on Public Libraries together with the Librarians Association of Malaysia and relaunch the Penang Libraries Network.

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3. Work towards setting up a dedicated library in the historic UNESCO World Heritage Site in George Town that will house everything published about Penang with digital access to everything in it.
4. Have an annual “Penang Book Festival” of all books about Penang or published on Penang. The history of publishing in Penang is another great story, including the story of bookshops of Penang.
5. Have an update of the two bibliographies of Penang previously done and to digitalise it.
6. Engage the Penang Library in the Penang Literary Festival and play a stronger role in using the kind of “Talking Books” model of George Town World Heritage Inc.
7. As a quick start and priority, start the digitalization of all newspapers in Penang and make them available. It will make every day of the history of Penang come alive like never before. It can develop into a “Penangpedia”, a website domain I have reserved for anyone who wants to collaborate on this.

The Penang Library must be seen and felt statewide like never before and become once again a greater knowledge leader. I believe it can. Think City, a subsidiary of Khazanah, will be happy to explore knowledge collaboration.

CONCLUSION.

In conclusion, let me say this. Penang aspires to be an intelligent city. I have a rapid appraisal system for cities, which I developed when I was heading the Asia Pacific Urban Governance Initiative of the United Nations for over a decade. I called the key performance indicators the “2L” Test – Libraries and Loos. How an organisation manages these two indicators of their present and their future. It will show you how both ends of the entity worked or did not work. Penang has a great opportunity to be a world leader in both. I look forward to working together to make the next journey of the Penang Library so that Penang continues to be what a great woman travel writer, Isabella Bird, said of Penang in 1883, “A truly brilliant place under a brilliant sky”. Thank you.

Note

Anwar Fazal is trained in economics and education and over the last 50 years been engaged in diverse fields - a teacher at the Royal Military College, a civil servant with the City Council of George Town, Private Secretary to Tun Dr Lim Chong Eu (1969-72) and head of a urban governance initiative for Asia and the Pacific of the United Nations. He has a life long history of public interest activism beginning with the presidency of the University of Malaya Students Union (UMSU) and the National Union of Malayan Students in 1962/1963, the founding of the Consumer Association of Penang (CAP), Transparency International Malaysia (TI) and a dozen other local and global civil society

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organisations including Health Action International (HAI) and the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action (WABA). He is an avid book lover and library advocate. He started the first library of the Students Union in 1962 and has pioneered special libraries in every major civil society organisation he served. He was the Honorary Supervisor of the Penang Library from 1965 to 1971 and served in the Committee of the Malayan Library Association from 1968 to 1972. Anwar is the recipient of several awards for his work as an environmental, consumer and health advocate including the Right Livelihood Award (popularly known as the "Alternative Nobel Prize") and the "Global 500 Award" of the United Nations Environment Programme. He is currently Director of the Right Livelihood College and Chairperson of Think City. He is also the recipient of Honorary Doctorates in Law and Philosophy from the National University of Malaysia (UKM) and Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) respectively. For more information, please visit www.anwarfazal.net and www.rightlivelihood.org/college.