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**The Congress of Southeast Asian Librarians (CONSAL) – an
Introduction**

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I. Introduction

1.1 Southeast Asia acquired its regional identity only after the Second World War¹. The region had traditionally been overshadowed by the cultural and political influence of Great Britain, China and India. But the Japanese policy of “Greater East Asia co-prosperity sphere” accorded greater recognition to the distinctiveness of Southeast Asia and therefore forced an identity to deal with the issues of independence and communism.² To a large extent the Southeast Asian regional identity is very much an idea rather than a geographic reality. Likewise, even as we speak of Southeast Asian libraries, a substantial amount of concerted effort in collection and professional development has taken place outside of Southeast Asia.

1.2 Today Australia, United States and United Kingdom provides the largest resource for Southeast Asian collections partly because of their historical linkages with Southeast Asia and more importantly because of their continued passion for a cultural understanding of the region.³ From books, serials to map collections, Southeast Asia has had a rich literary heritage owing to the confluence of major global economic powers and their mission of “civilisatrice”⁴ Southeast Asian history has been laced by intimate engagements of the economic prowess of the day, i.e. Arab, China, India, France, Japan, Spain, Germany, Russia, Great Britain and America. With

¹ Charles A Fisher, “ Southeast Asia: A Socio-Economic and Political Geography” (London: Menthuen and Co.,1964) p.3.

² N Tarling “Nations and States in Southeast Asia” (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 82-83.

³ For example the 1989 Ingleson Report which included a major examination of Australia's Asian library resources in Australia led to a regional content acquisition programme.

⁴ Or mission of civilising people

strategic transit sea lanes bridging the east and the west, the imperialist era of Southeast Asian history irreversibly transformed the region into a theatre of commerce (the likes of Macassar, Srivijaya and Majapahit) thereby creating a profound socio-cultural impact on its people and their collections. Fortunately the progeny of pre-imperialist civilised hubs of Funan (1-6th Century, Cambodia), Champa (2-17th Century AD, Coastal Vietnam), Pagan (1044-1287 AD, Myanmar), Srivijaya (7-13th Century AD, Bangka, Sumatra, Malay Peninsula), Angkor (9-15th Century, Cambodia), Majapahit (13-16th Century AD, Bali, Sumatra, Madura, Malay Peninsula, Borneo, Celebes, Moluccas, Lower Sunda Islands), Sukhothai (1238-1350 AD, Thai Kingdom), Ayutthya (1350-1767 AD, Menam Basin, Malay Peninsula)⁵ and many others attest to the region's resilience. It therefore continues to be the melting pot of the world's richest cultures and by the same token inherits the world's richest cultural collections.

2. Recurring Themes: Factors of Influence and Evolution

2.1 An examination of Southeast Asian libraries must begin with its intrinsic characteristics. Southeast Asia post-1945 is underwritten by *indigenism*.⁶ *Indigenism* refers to policies by ruling regimes in Southeast Asian societies to attempt to transform the ethnic dimensions of the economies inherited from colonialism. The Chinese economic predominance in pre-independence Southeast Asia is a clear instance. 6% of the entire Southeast Asian population is Chinese and have played a critical role in the economic development of the region in the colonial era. The newly independent societies after 1945 in Southeast Asia focused on economic redistribution along ethnic lines. Consequently information and collection management in Southeast Asian states became an instrument of political influence. This translated to active accumulation of "new" information, re-interpreted in the prevailing political themes, be it *NEP* (New Economic Policy) in Malaysia, or "*Thai Entrepreneurial Class*" in Thailand. The impact of indigenism has been the rise of ethnic collection networks. The Chinese Heritage Centre (CHC) established in 1995 and the Committee on Chinese Overseas Databank and Research Collections (COCOD) hubbed in Singapore is a case in point.⁷ In Malaysia, plans for the Putrajaya information network to connect Malay cultural centres in Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and Philippines are another derivative of indigenism. The rejuvenated Myanmar Public Library is an epitome of Burmese ethnic supremacy, much like the predominance of Javanese literature in Indonesia's National Library collection.

2.2 A related theme yet one that preceded indigenism is that of *vernacularism*. The ethnic diversity of the Southeast Asian polity is represented in its writings more so because of the organic development of knowledge across distinct and sometimes isolated economic zones of the

⁵ Amitav, Acharya, "The Quest for Identity: International Relations of Southeast Asia" (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 2000) p.19

⁶ See Patrick Heenan and Monique Lamontagne (eds), "The Southeast Asia Handbook" London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2001, pp.28,29.

⁷ For a thorough study refer to: International Conference of Institutes and Libraries for Overseas Chinese Studies, Ohio University, Athens, USA., 24-25 March, 2000. Chng Kim See, *Regional Resource Centre for Information and Documentation on Southeast Asian Chinese Studies: A virtual reality in Singapore?*

past. Hence vernacular literature is pervasive and dominates ethnic city streets of Southeast Asian polities. To a large extent it explains the disconnection between political centres and people centres. The huge vernacular collections are slowly becoming a sacred entity with the increase in the use of English in inter-city commerce. This is causing a knowledge divide between peoples, their past and the present. Southeast Asian libraries continue to regenerate the past with translations into the present thereby bridging the people and political centres of society.

2.3 A third underpinning factor is that of **ideological revivalism**. The largest collection assets of the region are religious or ideological texts, Buddhist, Islamic, Marxism etc. A strategic crossing for the export of Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic, Christian and Marxist influences in the past and the present, Southeast Asia served both as the target as well as the breeding ground for ideological revivalism. A natural corollary as such is the development of an international network of collection centres where closed circuit information networks operate seamlessly across borders to support ideological renovation at a regional scale. The regional *Hua Yi* network, the International Islamic Digital Library initiative of Malaysia and the MUFTI Digital Library Project (Library for the religious scholars) of Brunei are manifestations of these tendencies.

2.4 By far, Southeast Asian libraries are **subjects of their “port”** as much as their political environment. Hence library development in Southeast Asia has been a function of economic priorities of Southeast Asian countries. From the travel logs of historic marine centres, the business directories of the industrial revolution to the challenge of information services in the knowledge economy, collection centres have kept abreast with economic transformation. Southeast Asian libraries have similarly embarked on national efforts at digital information services providing the backbone of the emerging knowledge economy today.

3. CONSAL Key Developments

3.1 CONSAL, which began in 1970 with 2 members, today has 10 members in an area of about 1.5 million square miles and a population of 500 million characterized by great diversity of people, languages, religions and cultures. CONSAL stands strong as the only regional professional institution representing the cause of libraries and librarianship in Southeast Asia. CONSAL currently operates on a reciprocal model where member countries collaborate based on mutual benefits. With greater integration and empowerment granted to the Secretariat, CONSAL has the potential to evolve into a regional cooperative where services from one member country are supported through the contribution of the others to produce collective outcomes (e.g. Regional Union Catalogues). Yet a further evolution would see the development of a regional centre or communal model where all member countries contribute towards the establishment and operation of a **central institution** to produce collective outcomes. The initial years of the Secretariat have been critical in laying the foundation for the region. The following lays out the accomplishments as well as the limitations of our collective effort.

4. Regional Facilitation

4.1 One of the most important outcomes for CONSAL in the last four years has been the marketing of CONSAL to potential stakeholders both inside and outside of Southeast Asia. The Secretariat has helped to facilitate an understanding of issues and concerns of the region in several international platforms. The Global Knowledge Partnership, World Bank and Asian Development Banks, Management of Library Association (MLA, IFLA) are key communication platforms where the Secretariat delivers updates to foster a better understanding of the region. At the regional level, the e-ASEAN platform and the ASEAN COCI committee has been working closely with CONSAL to harness the strength and collaboration of the regional library fraternity. In 2001, ASEAN COCI recognised the coordinating capacity of the Secretariat and approved its proposal for a regional legal deposit catalogue digitisation project. Likewise e-ASEAN endorsed the proposal for an ASEAN Information Network that work towards content connectivity in the region.

4.2 The Secretariat has worked with different private and public organisations to facilitate projects and collaborations that would bridge the digital divide. In the year 2000, the Secretariat facilitated Gartner's free content offering through TIARA (Singapore's National Digital Library system, then) for a trial period of 1 year. 58 libraries in the region participated in the trial. In the same year the secretariat administered a book donation to Vietnam and Cambodia from the National Institute of Education, Singapore. International Book Aid and World Bank Book project has appointed CONSAL Secretariat as coordinators for their donations to Laos and Cambodia in 2001.

4.3 Subsequently the Secretariat established working relationships with Library Exchange, Myanmar International Resource Centre, Encore Technologies (Simputer), Horizon Pte Ltd and Global Library Services Network (GLSN) to embark on regional aid and assistance programmes in areas of book donations, computer centres and technology deployment. In 2002 we embarked on a trial for remote libraries particularly in developing countries with GLSN. CONSAL secretariat facilitated a national consortium building initiative by Electronic Information For Libraries (EIFL) to 7 countries in the region. CONSAL also provided information support to ALIA in their exploratory effort in Vietnam for MARC conversions and Swedish International Development Agency (SWIDA) for their investigative study in Laos and Vietnam.

4.4 In 2002/3 we have strengthened our collaboration with the signing of MOUs. Both Encore Technologies and the Indian Institute of Knowledge Management (IIKM) have signed MOUs that allow national constituents to enter into collaboration with them. ALIA has agreed to collaborate with CONSAL on several developmental issues and the recently signed MOU in 2003 is a testimony to their commitment to the region. With this recent development, a proper tracking and MOU management process will have to be put in place in the Secretariat to ensure that CONSAL member countries benefit adequately from this initiative. CONSAL has coordinated applications of Indonesia, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand for the TICER (Tilburg Innovation

Centre for Electronic Resources) programme in Netherlands. The IIKM is also offering subsidized scholarships to Southeast Asian library professionals. CONSAL WEB has carried these updates as and when they are available.

5. Communication and Integration

5.1 CONSAL WEB was introduced to the regional library community in April 2001 as the communication platform for professional communication and archival of CONSAL corporate memory. Since its introduction about 900 professionals from the region have registered. The website has about 4.6 million hits a month and an average 4 minute duration of logins. ALA complimented CONSAL for the website which has become a model for professional communication worldwide. The scope and potential of the website however has not been fully realised owing to inherent barriers, which include: language diversity in the region; the lack of confidence amongst librarians to communicate in English; ready availability of internet connections in the libraries of the region.

5.2 CONSAL Secretariat has facilitated 7 online web conferences, all of which have been successful in attracting regional participation. Given the federated infrastructure, CONSAL web requires greater participation from member countries. This will foster spontaneous sharing and collaboration amongst members from different countries across different domains of expertise. Currently the Resource centre and the Event Centres are the most widely used sections of the portal. The cost of operating the portal is however prohibitive. Built and maintained at the cost of 1.5 million over two years, CONSAL web stands the risk of not being sustainable. As part of the financial plan, it is recommended that the portal be subsumed under a larger framework or be integrated into a procurement portal. The Secretariat has offered several options with regard to the continued maintenance of the portal.

6. Project Coordination

6.1 The Secretariat has assisted several countries in their effort to secure funds and to coordinate activities approved by the CONSAL Board namely: resource sharing; preservation and conservation; copyright; training and development. In the area of resource sharing and legal depository, national imprints are being exchanged on a mutual basis. The delivery of digitisation machines to 9 countries under the auspices of ASEAN COCI is completed and the digitisation phase has begun. This should facilitate national imprints and e-book sharing across ASEAN countries through a regional gateway. A publication on electronic resource exchange will be circulated to member countries to assist in the electronic legal deposit project at the regional level.

6.2 In the arena of preservation and conservation training, Thailand has successfully coordinated training initiatives with the help of UNESCO and Singapore through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the digitisation training under this framework. The preservation and conservation training has had very positive feedback by participants. CONSAL is also pleased to release a

publication on preservation and heritage in the digital arena. A copy has been distributed to the CONSAL Executive Board Members.

6.3 The copyright project led by Singapore was successfully completed with the publication on Regional intellectual property laws for librarians. The publication done in collaboration with Baker & McKenzie provides insights into legal deposit and copyright legislations in member countries. Singapore has also initiated a regional authors' registry, which could be integrated into the upgraded CONSAL portal. The publication is currently available in most LIS bookstores.

6.4 Training and Development coordination was facilitated with the CONSAL Event Centre component. Member countries, particularly Indonesia and Brunei have been active in updating the event centres with local events. It has become a convenient tool for event and training updates, though countries like Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam have no means to participate given their inaccessibility to the Internet. In total, there were about 120 professionals trained region-wide through Singapore Cooperation Programmes, UNESCO and EIFL training sponsorships. This in itself is an unparalleled achievement and requires greater focus and attention in the years to come.

7. Professional Recognition

7.1 The Secretariat has championed professional recognition with the growing challenge that the Internet posed to libraries and librarianship in the region. In 2001 and 2003, Blackwell's' sponsored CONSAL outstanding librarian award was won by the Philippines. This will continue and will expand into areas of children's librarianship, public librarianship and several other professional fields of librarianship. CONSAL is also arranging for a strategic link-up with Special Libraries Association, ALA and ALIA to organise regional accreditation and professional exchange programmes. We therefore look forward for more aggressive developments in professional development and the acquisition of greater skills by regional librarians to meet the challenge of new information technologies.

7.2 The Secretariat takes note of the tremendous achievement of the Philippines in executing a professional accreditation process with the cooperation of their government. The Board for Libraries (BFL) was established following the endorsement of the PRC Modernisation Act in the year 2000. The BFL in the Philippines has the power to evaluate an application for registration, give or conduct the licensure examination, register successful examinees and regulate their practice within the territorial jurisdiction of the Philippines. The Accredited Professional Organisation (APO), which is represented by PLAI, administers the programme. The BFL has been created to ensure that only those who pass the appropriate licensure examination for librarians are granted the Certificate of Registration and licence to practise as librarians. Total registered librarians as of Year 2002 in the Philippines are 3,806. The Secretariat strongly urges member countries to adopt the Philippine model in maintaining quality standards for the

librarians. Distance learning and life-long learning are key programmes in our next phase of professional development.

8. Organisational Evolution

8.1 CONSAL Secretariat has evolved from merely a project coordination office to an aggressive advocate and regional marketing agency for CONSAL member libraries. New groupings have evolved in the region. The **CONSAL Council of Chief Academic Librarians** group will be inaugurating a framework to further their interests within this larger framework. The Secretariat is of the opinion that such a development will foster greater intra-CONSAL collaboration than the existing centralised framework. There were calls for a CONSAL Media Libraries Network as well. The Executive Board is currently studying the proposals and the potential impact it would have on CONSAL as a professional entity.

9. Key National Developments

9.1 In **Brunei**, the Ministry of Culture, Information and Sports is currently studying a proposal to construct 4 new public libraries to make knowledge accessible to the citizens. The infrastructure project complements a national digital library programme that will support the educational institution. A major digitization project to build an international mufti (Muslim scholars) digital library is underway, headed by the Prime Minister's Office. CONSAL had earlier proposed for the development of a National Library in Brunei to the Ministry of Culture, Information and Sports. The recommendation has not been adopted by the Bruneian government.

9.2 In 2003, the government of **Cambodia** made Internet accessible in 4 public libraries and 22 community information centers. Each province has a community information centre which can access a Khmer language web portal. A dedicated library network (RUPP) is currently being developed. UNESCO, UNICEF and NGO's like "Buddhism for development" have undertaken major information literacy initiatives in Cambodia last year.

9.3 In **Indonesia**, the National Library has facilitated the construction of the First Presidential Library (Presidential Library of Bung Karno) with the laying of the foundation stone early this year. The development was undertaken by the Municipal Government of Blitar (East Java). The Hatta Foundation has proposed the development of the Library of Bung Hatta (first Vice President) in Bukittinggi (West Sumatra). The Indonesian National Digital Library Network (IDNL) has 80 participating institutions to date with a collection of more than 2,000 digital files.

9.4 In **Laos**, the government has planned for the development of 10 school libraries for 2003-2004 and two public libraries with the help of the Shanti Voluntary Association. The National Assembly Library (de facto National Library of Laos) has beefed up mobile library services with 3 new buses that will be extended to 3 new provinces.

9.5 In **Malaysia**, the Johor State Library, Sabah State Library and Perlis State Library underwent extensive renovation. About RM 1m was spent on the development of town libraries that included the Selandar Town Library, Melaka and the Seriting Town Library. 29 Cyberknowledge centres were established nationwide networked with computers. A total of RM 1.8m was provided to State Libraries for local digitization projects. NLM (National Library of Malaysia) has introduced an E-Library User Education programme. In 2003, Strategic Recommendations with a five-year implementation plan for PERDANA (Malaysian National Digital Library initiative) was presented. NLM showcased the Islamic Digital Library Network (IDLN) to the Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC) Conference in October 2003.

9.6 **Myanmar** has constructed a new National Library building that will showcase its most prized manuscript collection. Myanmar has also embarked on a digitization project to preserve its valuable heritage collection. The National Union Catalogue is available digitally within Myanmar through the efforts of the University Library.

9.7 In **Philippines**, the government approved an estimated US\$2.5m budget towards the development of a National digital library and digitization programme. As of September 2003, Philippines has 977 public libraries which include a congressional library, a regional library, 49 provincial libraries, 82 city libraries, 512 municipal libraries and 332 district libraries. There are about 3,000 licensed librarians in Philippines.

9.8 In October 2003, the National Library Board of **Singapore** reopened Queenstown Community library that featured facilities catering to the special needs of the elderly and physically handicapped, including wheelchair-friendly access, a lift within the library building and stations with lowered heights. The new facilities in the library incorporate many 'self-help' conveniences that reduce waiting time – self-service Borrowing Stations, 24-hour Book Drop, Borrower's Enquiry & Payment stations, Membership Registration Kiosks and the "Cybrarian" (Cyber Librarians) stations that allow users to interact with librarians online. Singapore also opened its third regional library – Jurong Regional Library in June 2004 with a focus on youths. The Teens Library, a unique feature of the library, is inspired by teens, created for teens and run by teens. NLB involved teenagers every step of the way, from concept to implementation. Following a competition three years ago to gather ideas on what teens would like to see in a library, the NLB involved a group of teen volunteers to design, create and run a space of their own. The result is a vibrant space for the youth, with fun yet meaningful activities that stretch their imagination, and that gives them a sense of ownership and pride in being able to execute what they dare to dream.

9.9 In October 2003 **Thailand** announced a national e-library network, a national knowledge institute to be managed by Information and Communication Technology, Education and Culture ministries linking libraries and reading centres nation wide. A 10b baht Knowledge Management Development Organisation (KMDO) under the Prime Minister's office will be set up to increase levels of knowledge through the promotion of reading,

creating a living library with e-books. The government also allocated \$20m baht to 30,000 public school libraries every year for the next three years.

9.10 Vietnam has constructed 34 new district libraries, 392 new community libraries and 28 new reading rooms for children in 2003. The National Library of Vietnam registered a record high visit of 399,995 or 1300 visits in 2003 with 28,115 members issued with reader cards. The legal depository collections in Vietnam average 9,600 each year from 45 publishing houses. In 2003 NLV collected 11,987 items. About 80,000 books were sponsored to Vietnamese libraries by the Asia Foundation. NLV also organized 2 national conferences and implemented +DDC and AACR2 Translation into Vietnamese with the help of the ALIA.

10. CONCLUSION

Libraries in Southeast Asia have progressed significantly in the last 4 years with the help of the regional grouping and to a large extent by virtue of local economic development. The support framework and the connectivity that the CONSAL Secretariat offers has created a more cohesive and collaborative library community in the region. It has also enabled the countries in the region to have a better understanding of their neighbours. Many of these countries were conflict zones two decades ago. The intra-ASEAN ethnic and political rivalry fuelled by big power involvement had divided the region into haves and have-nots. Libraries and information centres have and will continue to play a significant role in integrating Southeast Asia into a competitive region by bridging the divide and creating a dividend.

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