



Remembering the PART-TIME LIBRARIES

Part-time branch libraries served residents living in suburban Singapore before fulltime public libraries were built.

By Goh Lee Kim

The reading room of the Yio Chu Kang Part-time Branch Library, 1950s. It was run by volunteers and popular among students from the school opposite. *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*

When Irene Chee was in primary school in the 1950s, one of her favourite things to do after school was to drop by a library to borrow books. However, the library she went to was not the Raffles Library on Stamford Road (which became the National Library in 1960). Instead, she patronised a tiny library in her neighbourhood in Katong, the Joo Chiat Library, which was located in the Joo Chiat Community Centre. She remembers that the library was very small. “I studied in Katong Convent and on some days, I would drop by the library on my way home from school. I remember borrowing books by Enid Blyton and this started my interest in reading,” recalled Chee, who is now 79.¹

Not many people today know this, but there used to be part-time branch libraries in Singapore. The library in Joo Chiat was one of eight part-time libraries run by the Raffles Library between the 1950s and the early 1980s. These libraries were found in the suburbs of Singapore – Upper Serangoon, Siglap, Joo Chiat, Yio Chu Kang, Chai Chee, Bedok, Jurong and Whampoa.

These part-time libraries were usually small and did not have a large collection of books. They typically borrowed spaces in buildings like community centres and social welfare centres, although one was located in a void deck. They only opened three or four times a week and had shorter hours.

The first fulltime branch library established by the National Library was the Queenstown Branch Library, which opened in 1970 and located on Margaret Drive. Before fulltime branch libraries were opened, people could only rely on part-time libraries (and mobile libraries) if they could not afford the time or money to travel to Stamford Road.

These part-time libraries thus played an important role in bringing books to outlying communities before a network of fulltime branch libraries was set up. Subsequently, these part-time libraries continued to exist as a stop-gap measure for new estates that did not yet have a fulltime branch library nearby. However, as the National Library’s network of libraries effectively fanned out throughout Singapore, the need for part-time libraries declined. The last part-time branch library in Whampoa opened in 1981 and was shuttered six years later.

Expanding Library Services

For decades, the subscription-based Raffles Library – established in 1845 as the Singapore Library – was the main library catering to the public.² Since 1887, the Raffles Library had shared the same building with the Raffles Museum on Stamford Road. By the 1920s, as the collections and exhibits expanded, the lack of space became an issue and there were calls for the government to consider expanding or relocating the library to larger premises to accommodate the growing visitorship and collections.³

In May 1940, the Straits Settlements Association submitted a letter to the government to recommend

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Library	Location	Date of Opening	Date of Closure
Upper Serangoon	Social Welfare Centre, Lim Ah Pin Road	29 December 1953	June 1960
Siglap	Social Welfare Centre, junction of East Coast Road and Palm Road	1 July 1954	20 March 1981
Joo Chiat*	Joo Chiat Community Centre, Joo Chiat Road	1 October 1955	1 June 1974
Yio Chu Kang	Yio Chu Kang Community Centre, Yio Chu Kang Road	24 November 1956	June 1960
Chai Chee**	A shophouse in Block 28, Chai Chee Avenue	9 November 1974	January 1981
Jurong	Jurong Town Community Centre, Yung An Road	15 November 1977	23 May 1988
Bedok	Block 209 Upper Changi Road, Bedok Town Centre	14 January 1981	15 August 1985
Whampoa	Block 73, Whampoa Road, opposite Whampoa Community Centre	1 October 1981	30 July 1987

* Joo Chiat Library was opened on 9 August 1949 by the Social Welfare Department and the British Council. It came under the management of the Raffles Library in 1955.

** Chai Chee Part-time Branch Library relocated to Bedok Town Centre in 1981 and became Bedok Part-time Branch Library.

improvements to library services in Singapore. One recommendation was the establishment of branch libraries and reading rooms in the suburbs – such as Katong, Siglap, Paya Lebar and Pasir Panjang – where the majority of the population lived. The association pointed out that the Raffles Library “fails by reason of its high cost and its situation and hours, to appeal to considerable sections of the English-speaking and English-reading public which have small means and little spare time”.⁴

Around the same time, the Raffles Library’s committee of management was also considering extension plans of its own. It was keen to take over parts of the former St Andrew’s School on Stamford Road next door to set up a public library.⁵

F.N. Chasen, the director of the Raffles Library and Museum, believed that such extensions were critical: “As I see it, the ideal library situation in this city is that every responsible person should have access to a well-stocked reference and lending library... For books are not luxuries; far from it: they are among the prime necessities of life.”⁶ However, as the library was subsidised by the government, it lacked the necessary funding for this extension. In July 1940, the government postponed the extension scheme citing cost concerns and other uses for the school building.⁷

During the Japanese Occupation (1942–45), the Raffles Library and Museum was appropriated by the Japanese and renamed Syonan Tosyokan and Syonan Hakubutsukan respectively. When the war ended, it reopened to the public on 1 December 1945.⁸ Users promptly returned and within a year, membership at the Raffles Library reached its highest ever recorded.⁹



LADY GIMSON speaking at the opening ceremony of the public library at Joo Chiat road yesterday. From left to right are: Miss R. Handy, Miss Kate Ferguson, Lady Gimson, Mr. T. P. F. McNiece and Mr. G. H. Kiat. —Straits Times picture.

(Above) Lady Gimson, wife of Governor Franklin Gimson, speaking at the opening ceremony of Joo Chiat Library on 9 August 1949. Source: The Straits Times © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

District Library For Katong

IF Singapore is ever going to develop with a personality of its own, that development could only have its origin in Katong, said the Secretary for Social Welfare, Mr. T. P. F. McNiece, at the opening of the public library at Joo Chiat road yesterday.

(Top right) The reading area of the Joo Chiat Part-time Branch Library, 1950s. Collection of the National Library Singapore.

(Below) Joo Chiat Community Centre, 1964. It housed the Joo Chiat Library between 1949 and 1974. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

The idea of branch libraries came into focus once more. In May 1949, in response to a question raised during a Legislative Council meeting, the government again deferred plans for branch libraries, citing the need to appoint a qualified librarian to head the Raffles Library first.¹⁰ Nonetheless, a working committee was formed in January 1950 to look into the improvement and extension of library services in Singapore, including the setting up of branch libraries.¹¹

In the meantime, rather than wait for the Raffles Library to open a branch in the suburbs, the Department of Social Welfare and the British



Council established the Joo Chiat Library. Located in the new Joo Chiat Community Centre, it was opened on 9 August 1949 by Lady Gimson, wife of Governor Franklin Gimson.

“Through this library, people will obtain right reading and right companionship,” she said, “and this will inevitably lead to right thinking for the people of Singapore.” Membership was 10 cents a month for children and 25 cents for adults, with a \$1 deposit for a book. Despite the fees, the library gained more than 400 members within a month of its opening.¹²

Meanwhile, on 4 May 1950, the United States Information Service (USIS) Library in Raffles Place opened, becoming Singapore’s first free public library (the Raffles Library at the time was still subscription-based). The USIS Library was lauded for its accessible location and opening hours that catered to the working population.

The library was so highly anticipated that 55 people were waiting in line when it first opened, and the first person in the queue was given a free book. “[T]he American library must be welcomed as a valuable acquisition for Singapore,” the *Straits Times* reported. “The hunger for reading which has been manifested both in the adult population and in the schools since the war is attested by many observers, and the more libraries there are in this city the better.” Within weeks, the library had attracted 5,000 members.¹³

Part-time Branch Libraries

The government finally approved the establishment of branch libraries in September 1951. Four branches would be opened at community centres under construction in the suburbs, each providing a selection of between 2,000 and 3,000 books comprising dictionaries, encyclopedias, directories, reference maps, English classics and literature, books on fiction, travel and adventure, periodicals and magazines, children’s titles, as well as publications in Chinese, Malay and Tamil.¹⁴

It would take another two years before the Raffles Library opened the first part-time branch library. It was located within the Social Welfare Centre on Lim Ah Pin Road in Upper Serangoon and began operations on 29 December 1953. “There are books for senior and junior readers as well as a small reference section,” Raffles Librarian Kay Hudson told the *Singapore Free Press*. “It’s starting in a small way – with about 2,000 books – but we have great hopes of it growing.”¹⁵

The library was only open four days a week, from 3 pm to 8 pm on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, and from 2 pm to 5 pm on Saturdays. “It’s unfortunate that we can’t open in the morning because the building is occupied by a children’s welfare centre,” said Hudson. According to Sunny Chiok Hock Siew, who managed the branch, another reason for the later opening hours was to cater to working adults who could only visit after work.¹⁶

To serve people living in the east, the Siglap Part-time Branch Library opened at the Social Welfare Centre, located at the junction of East Coast Road and Palm Road, six months later on 1 July 1954. This branch also operated only four days a week: from 3 pm to 8 pm on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays, and from 2 pm to 5 pm on Saturdays. The library proved popular with residents in the area. Hudson told the *Singapore Free Press*: “There are now some 80 senior and junior members and we have great hopes of it growing more.”¹⁷

Joo Chiat Library became the third part-time branch library on 1 October 1955 when it was handed over to the Raffles Library to manage. The library was opened three times a week on Mondays and Wednesdays (2 pm to 8 pm), and Saturdays (10 am to 5 pm).¹⁸

An opportunity arose for the Raffles Library to set up another branch in Yio Chu Kang when the library received a book gift from the principal of a Chinese school nearby. The fourth part-time branch library was officially opened at Yio Chu Kang Community Centre on 24 November 1956 by Chief Minister Lim Yew Hock.¹⁹ It was also the first Chinese branch opened by the Raffles Library, with its collection comprising 1,000 titles in Chinese and 500 titles in English.²⁰

Although part-time branch libraries did help to bring books to residents in rural areas, they also had shortcomings, particularly in terms of manpower and space constraints, noted Chan Thye Seng. Chan worked at part-time branches and later headed the Library Extension Services that oversaw the part-time branches and the mobile library service.²¹

He said that managing a branch was practically a one-man show. “You had to run the library all by yourself, doing two or three evenings a week and every Saturday afternoon for one full year. And I had to programme myself accordingly with time to shelf the collection, to shelf the books, to attend to circulation routines and answer readers’ enquiries.” Part-time branches were also reliant on the community centres to set aside space for them to operate and were typically not well equipped.²²

Chan recalled that the Siglap branch was “just a classroom of less than 1,000 square feet” and shared the community centre with a dental clinic, kindergarten and community classes. Once, he had opened the library as usual until the closing time at 8 pm despite the building being “deathly still” because no one had informed him that the community centre was closed that day.²³

Library users wrote in to the newspapers to voice their displeasure over the lack of space and the sparseness of the collections at part-time libraries. “At present the Joo Chiat Library looks more like a... hut than anything else. It needs repainting and definitely more chairs and tables,” complained Lynette in a letter to the *Straits Times* in July 1971. She added that she had to “mooch around for 1½ hours” before she could “run for an empty chair”.²⁴

When the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Labour and Law took over the community centres at Upper Serangoon and Yio Chu Kang respectively in 1960, the two branches lost their space and were closed. Likewise, the Joo Chiat branch closed in 1974 when the community centre was demolished to make way for a larger and more modern building.²⁵

The first part-time branch library in Upper Serangoon opened in December 1953. The library “saved book-lovers many a trip to the city library”. Image reproduced from “This Is a Happy Suburb and a Library Helps,” *Singapore Free Press*, 31 May 1954, 7. (From NewspaperSG).



THIS IS A HAPPY SUBURB And a library helps

THE residents of the Tampenis - Upper Serangoon district of Singapore can count themselves “lucky” so far as suburban areas go.

For although six miles from the city, they still enjoy amenities not usually found in rural areas.

There are also definite signs that new and better facilities are being opened up for the future progress of the community.

One important step already evident is the recent setting up of a suburban branch library.

Residents grow book-conscious

The idea — “to make the books go to the people instead of the people coming to the books” — has certainly

Bookworms' delight

S'pore's first library on void deck draws the holiday crowd

Singapore's first void-deck library at Whampoa has drawn crowds of avid readers since it opened on Oct 1.

In the past two weeks — with the school holidays — a total of 4302 books was borrowed from the adults' section and 9063 from the children's section.

The library — a branch of the National Library — is at Block 73 in Whampoa Road. It has attracted 900 adults and 1714 children as members.

The officer in-charge, Miss Liow Mee Yiok, said activities such as story-telling sessions and film shows have met with good response.

Initially about 10 children attended the weekly story-telling sessions, but with the holidays, more are attending. Although most of the members are children, more adults are joining the library which has 12,000 books, said Miss Liow.

The Whampoa Part-time Branch Library in a void deck, 1981. Image reproduced from "Bookworms' Delight," *New Nation*, 16 December 1981, 8. (From NewspaperSG).



Void deck-turned-library in Whampoa ... HDB spent \$50,000 on it. • Picture by DAVID TAN

Fulltime Branches

Singapore achieved internal self-government in May 1959, and in July that year, Minister for Culture S. Rajaratnam announced that the Raffles National Library (renamed in 1958 after the Raffles National Library Ordinance was passed)²⁶ would undergo a complete reorganisation of its administration and contents to make it "more reflective and representative of the people of this country" through the expansion of the Chinese, Malay and Tamil collections. A "greater decentralisation of the library facilities" was also on the horizon.²⁷

In December 1960, Rajaratnam established a board for the National Library to make recommendations on the provision, regulation, extension and use of static and mobile library services to the public and government departments. Chaired by cinema magnate Loke Wan Tho, the board recommended the prioritisation of the expansion of library services to other areas of Singapore through decentralisation in four stages.²⁸

In their report, the board acknowledged that the part-time branch library scheme was "valuable for the interim development", but it "does not consider that full scale development should take place there" because of two reasons: first, part-time branches were usually sited in areas with less traffic; and second, community centres were "fully committed" with sports, classes and other activities. The board recommended that branch libraries be built in their own spaces and serve users on a fulltime basis.²⁹

With the board's recommendations, the National Library refocused its energy on building fulltime branch libraries in heavily populated areas, starting with the first satellite town of Queenstown in 1970, followed by Toa Payoh in 1974 and Marine Parade in 1978.³⁰

Part-time libraries continued to play an important role by providing interim services to residents while housing estates and fulltime branches

were still in development. However, once fulltime libraries were up and running, the part-time branches were gradually phased out. The Siglap part-time branch, for example, closed in March 1981, three years after the Marine Parade Branch Library opened.³¹

Moving into the Heartlands

The subsequent part-time libraries functioned as a transitory service and were primarily situated in the heartlands to be closer to the residents.

The fifth part-time branch, which opened at Block 28 Chai Chee Avenue in November 1974, became the largest part-time branch to date. It was also the first library to be housed within a rented shophouse owned by the Housing and Development Board (HDB).³²

The sixth part-time branch began operations at the Jurong Town Community Centre on Yung An Road on 15 November 1977. The *New Nation* reported that although Jurong had a population of 90,000, only 80 people were members of the library. Due to low usage, the branch initially opened only on Tuesdays from 2 pm to 8 pm, with services later extended to Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, from 3 pm to 9 pm.

According to the National Library, the poor membership was attributed to the fact that "not many people were aware of its existence".³³ The part-time Jurong library ceased operations in May 1988 with the impending opening of the Jurong East Branch Library in August, becoming the final part-time branch library to close its doors.³⁴

After structural issues were discovered in the shophouse it occupied, the Chai Chee branch was relocated to Block 209 Upper Changi Road in Bedok Town Centre in January 1981 where it became the seventh part-time branch — Bedok Part-time Branch Library.³⁵ Operating for just four years, the part-time library closed in August 1985 when the Bedok Branch Library opened in October the same year.³⁶

The eighth and last part-time branch library opened at the void deck of Block 73 Whampoa Road, opposite the Whampoa Community Centre, on 1 October 1981. This also marked the first time that a library was situated in a void deck.

Within two weeks of its opening, 900 adults and 1,714 children joined as members and they borrowed a total of 4,302 and 9,053 books from the adults' and children's sections respectively. The Whampoa branch was operational almost daily except on Sundays, opening from 2 pm to 8 pm on Mondays, Wednesday and Fridays, and from 9 am to 6 pm on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays.³⁷

However, by 1985, operating hours were halved due to dwindling usage.³⁸ The library eventually closed in July 1987 due to HDB's demolition exercise,

and users were urged to visit the Toa Payoh Branch Library that was nearby.³⁹

In 1981, the National Library announced plans to open eight more fulltime branch libraries in various HDB estates over the next 11 years.⁴⁰ Part-time branch libraries were gradually phased out and the libraries in Whampoa and Jurong were the last to shut before the part-time library scheme fully gave way to fulltime branch libraries by the late 1980s.

For 30 years, part-time libraries brought books to the people and extended library services to neighbourhoods in the outlying areas. These libraries may be largely forgotten today but while they existed, they played an important role in supporting Singapore's push for literacy, education and economic development. ♦

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