

A RECENT HISTORY OF LEGAL DEPOSIT IN SINGAPORE

The scope of legal deposit in Singapore expanded to digital materials and web archiving in 2018.

By Samantha Chen

For decades, legal deposit in the National Library laboured quietly in the background, collecting and preserving Singapore’s published heritage. In October 2015, PublicationSG (<https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/publicationsg/>) thrust legal deposit into the spotlight.

To mark the 50th anniversary of Singapore’s independence and the 20th birthday of the National Library Board (NLB), the National Library launched PublicationSG, an online catalogue that made the more than one million legal deposit titles stored away for preservation available to the public for the first time.

Making the Legal Deposit Collection digitally searchable meant that a database about the items first had to be created and systemised – a monumental undertaking. For many months before the launch, staff were rostered to accession (assign barcodes) and catalogue the publications.

The result of the rigorous mobilisation led to the creation of more than 800,000 records for items in the Legal Deposit Collection, almost eight times more than the volume in a normal year. Concurrently, staff from the IT department worked on creating the PublicationSG microsite, while librarians crafted the policies and processes for accessing the materials.

The launch of PublicationSG was accompanied by *Our Published Heritage*, an exhibition held at the National Library Building from October 2015 to February 2016.

Highlights included the July 1960 inaugural issue of *Her World* magazine, the first issue of the Singapore



The display of legal deposit titles at the launch of PublicationSG, 2015. Collection of the National Library Singapore.

Armed Forces’ *Pioneer* magazine in 1969, and the programme booklet commemorating the foundation stone-laying ceremony of Clyde Terrace Market on 29 March 1873.¹

Digital Legal Deposit

PublicationSG also marked the first step in the digitalisation of the Legal Deposit Collection. With the multitude of digital platforms (websites, social media, etc.) and formats (videos, e-publications, etc.)

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and their widespread adoption into daily life, NLB recognised that it had to start collecting digital and web-based materials.

Even as PublicationSG was being launched, preparations were already underway to amend the NLB Act to include digital materials within its mandatory collecting scope.

In July 2018, the passing of the National Library Board (Amendment) Act marked a second milestone for digital legal deposit, allowing the National Library to archive websites containing the .sg domain without the need for written permission from content owners.²

To prepare for the expanded role, the Web Archive Singapore portal (WAS, <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/webarchives/landing-page>) – an initiative that began in 2006 to archive Singapore-related websites – was revamped in August 2018 and incorporated into the Legal Deposit Collection.

In anticipation of the statutory change, NLB brought back *Our Published Heritage* in November 2018 – this time as a two-day roadshow – to help the public understand what legal deposit (physical and digital) is and why it is meaningful for Singapore.

This was followed by the launch of the Deposit Portal (<https://www.nlb.gov.sg/depositapp/>) in 2021, a one-stop online portal for publishers to deposit their Singapore e-publications and apply for International Standard Numbers (a standardised international number that uniquely identifies a publication).

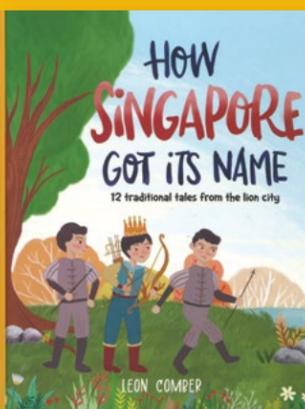
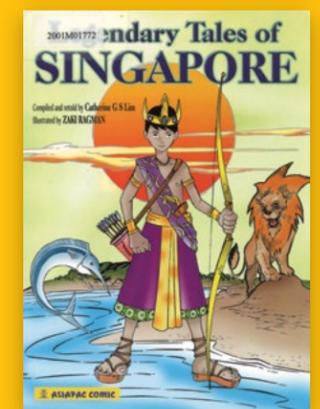
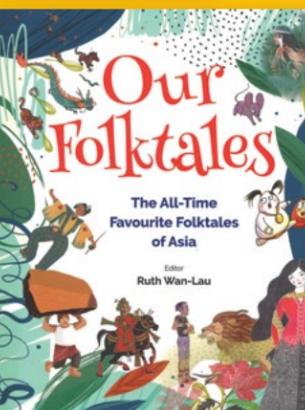
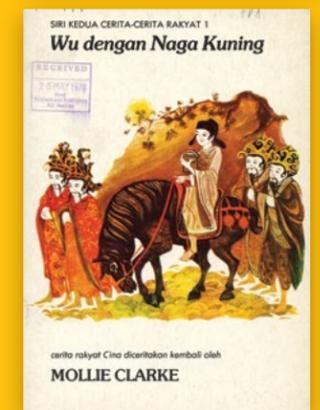
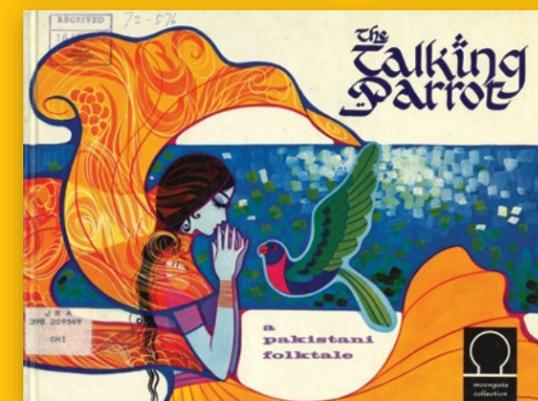
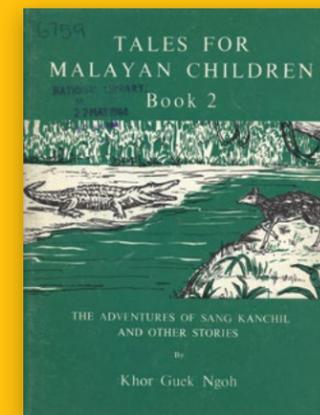
Public Awareness

Our Published Heritage gave focus to the breadth of Singapore’s published heritage and underscored the importance of preserving it. However, legal deposit’s “national character” – a term that Director of the National Library Hedwig Anuar had used to describe the Legal Deposit Collection in 1962³ – is sometimes interpreted differently by publishers and the public.

In 1976, a local author was peeved when the National Library notified him to deposit five copies of his booklet at his own expense with the library, instead of purchasing lending copies to reward him for his contributions. He had the misconception that only local writers and not others had to deposit their works.⁴ The National Library had to clarify that the function of legal deposit was to preserve Singapore’s published heritage, and that the legislation applied to all writers. The library also assured him that copies of his book had been purchased for loan purposes.⁵

Collection Highlights

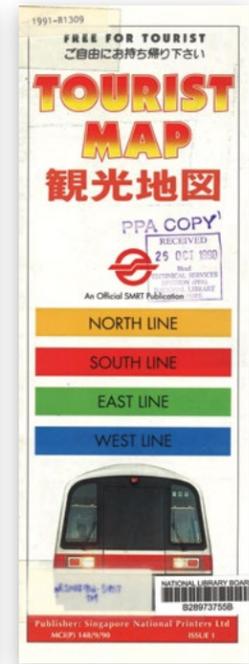
Because of its broad collecting scope, some materials may exist exclusively in legal deposit. In 2020, history enthusiast Lee Xuan Jin blogged about how he managed to hunt down two works by the local writer Cao Mo (曹沫) in PublicationSG after a fruitless search elsewhere.⁶



A selection of children’s folktales shows how these have evolved over time to focus more on Singapore tales. Collection of the National Library Singapore.



(From left) This 1980 poster by the Singapore Family Planning and Population Board encouraged Singaporeans to have only two children. *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*



Tourist Map (1990) published by the Singapore Mass Rapid Transit shows a map of Singapore with the four MRT lines. It also highlights places of interest. *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*

A meme from SGAG during the Covid-19 pandemic, April–June 2020. *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*



Legal deposit can also include materials with limited public circulation, or which are not commercially available. It can also encompass ephemeral formats such as campaign posters or programme booklets that are usually discarded, making them valuable primary sources.

Likewise, web-based materials are “snapshots” that preserve otherwise fleeting components of Singapore’s internet heritage. In view of the rapidly evolving digital landscape, NLB must be selective about the web-based materials it collects. For websites, the focus is on those with the .sg domain.

NLB may also do more targeted collecting under special circumstances. The one-time collection of Covid-19 memes from SGAG is an example.⁷ Memes are a form of image-based digital communication that rely on recontextualising popular images circulated online. The SGAG memes play on Singaporean tropes to grapple with the reality of the pandemic, effectively capturing the zeitgeist of a Singapore during the 2020 circuit breaker.

Last but not least, legal deposit documents the rich history of publishing itself, and testifies to a writing, publishing and retail industry that has shaped Singapore’s literary environment today.

(Clockwise from top left)

This 1979 booklet from the Singapore Turf Club recalls the heyday of the club and horse racing in Singapore. *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*

This 1964 edition is a reprint of the tale of Hang Tuah retold and popularised by prominent British officer, Abdul Mubin Sheppard. It was published by Donald Moore, himself a notable contributor to Singapore’s arts and publishing scene. *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*

好公民 (一上–六下) (1A–6B) (1996), or *Good Citizen*, is a series of moral education textbooks launched in 1981 to instil values and equip students with skills to be good individuals and useful citizens. *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*

Mata Intan (1951), a love story, was written in Jawi by the popular Malay novelist Wijaya Mala. In the early years, it was not uncommon for books to be published in Jawi, Arabic or Javanese. *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*

Challenges and New Formats

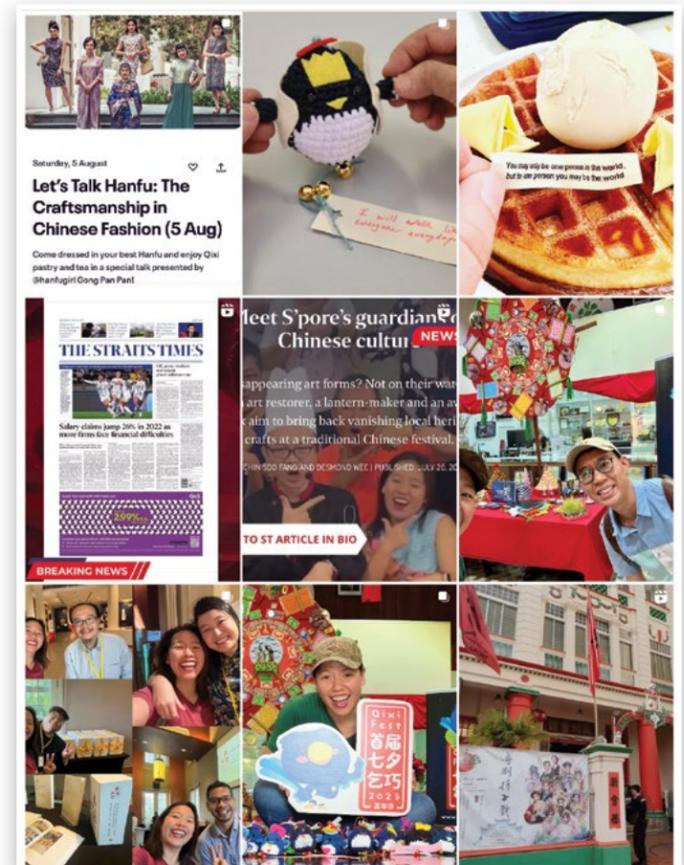
When it comes to physical legal deposit items, NLB faces a perennial problem: the larger the collection, the greater the issue of space shortage.⁸ On the digital front, NLB has to constantly update its digital infrastructure to keep up with new storage and format requirements.

More recently, developments in artificial intelligence (AI) technology mean that novel digital formats, such as algorithms, could potentially fall within the scope of legal deposit. Besides the challenges of collecting and preserving such materials, issues of transparency, copyright protection, fair use and more could also arise when attempting to make such proprietary materials publicly accessible.⁹ Additionally, other libraries have started to encounter AI-generated works in their legal deposit collections. This has raised questions of authenticity and whether such works can, or should, be included in the corpus of a nation’s published heritage – something Singapore could also expect to encounter in the foreseeable future.

For now, NLB continues to grow its Legal Deposit Collection and has even embarked on social media archiving. An Instagram account that NLB has archived belongs to Lynn Wong Yuqing (@lynnwyyq), a heritage consultant on a “mission to uncover, document, and revive disappearing foods, festivals, spaces, and communities in Singapore”.¹⁰ Sri Warisan Som Said Performing Arts Ltd, a multidisciplinary performing arts company, has likewise contributed their Facebook archives to NLB for preservation.¹¹

Members of the public can get involved by recommending Instagram, Facebook and YouTube accounts for archiving via “Internet Gems”, the annual callout on social media for public nominations. NLB intends to make the archived social media accounts accessible in future when the technology to do so has been developed.

While legal deposit in Singapore started out as a regulation for publishers, the latest initiatives by the



Screenshot of Lynn Wong’s Instagram page (@lynnwyyq). *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*

National Library show that the legal deposit statutory function has evolved to keep up with the times, one that has and continues to grow through interacting with legislation, publishers and the public. ♦

NOTES

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- “Meet Lynn Wong,” Lynn Wong, accessed 30 March 2025, <https://lynnwong.com/>; Lynn Wong Yuqing (@lynnwyyq), Instagram, accessed 30 March 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/lynnwyyq/>.
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ACCESSING THE LEGAL DEPOSIT COLLECTION

Library members can search the NLB catalogue for PublicationSG materials and place a reservation to consult the Legal Deposit materials via the “Request for PublicationSG Materials” online form (<https://form.gov.sg/600008f1ba0ee20011f16351>). For more information, visit <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/publicationsg/>.

The Legal Deposit electronic collection is available for viewing at a designated computer terminal at Level 11 of the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library at the National Library Building, Victoria Street.