Regional Resource Centre for Information and Documentation on Southeast Asian Chinese Studies: A Virtual Reality in Singapore?

by

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In an earlier paper on the topic I delivered at the IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions) 62nd General Conference, Beijing, August 1996, I had recorded in a footnote that:

> *The idea of organizing the first international conference of a gathering of specialist librarians and scholars on ethnic Chinese studies was mooted during discussions by Dr Hwa-Wei Lee with various persons ... in Singapore which he visited ... [in 1996]. Dr Lee also discussed the development of a world-wide network of resources (librarians, scholars, libraries, etc.). His visit instigated this writer to conceptualize a model for a regional centre in Southeast Asia when she was invited to present a paper at IFLA, Beijing* (Ch'ng, 1996).

This first international conference at Ohio University, Athens, only serves to demonstrate, unequivocally, Dr Lee's track record that he delivers on his promise. Indeed, his vision of a world-wide network appears set to materialize an international *guanxi*, the first of its kind, on Chinese overseas[1] information. I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to Dr Hwa-Wei Lee whom I had met in 1974 in Bangkok at a UNESCO course in which he was one of the resource persons. It was admiration at first sight, and to this day I have been observing his tenacious pursuit of his dreams and their fulfillment with awe and respect.

It is indeed a humbling experience to be invited to present a keynote address to this distinguished audience, not to mention the rare privilege and honour on such an auspicious occasion, especially on the threshold of the new millennium and during the

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[1] In Ch'ng (1996), the writer exhorts the discontinued use of the term "Overseas Chinese" (*Huaqiao*) as it connotes Chinese from mainland China and Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Macao, residing in other countries. The term *Zhongguo ren* (Chinese person) is also not encouraged. A preferred term, now adopted in academic circles is *Huayi*, meaning of Chinese extraction or Chinese descendant, the nearest currently accepted English version being "Chinese Overseas". This being so, this writer still prefers the term "ethnic Chinese".

lunar year of the Golden Dragon[2]. May I also take this opportunity to thank the sponsors and organizers for inviting me to participate in this long overdue conference, in particular to Dr Lee, Mrs Lian The-Mulliner and Dr Liren Zheng with whom I have been corresponding regarding my participation.

Mission of a Regional Research Information Centre on Chinese Overseas

At IFLA, Beijing, I expounded the concept of a regional centre for ethnic Chinese studies in Southeast Asia,[3] the rationale and general objectives[1] being:

- To help foster a better understanding of ethnic Chinese communities in Southeast Asia amongst the indigenous populations, other populations and other Chinese through the provision of information on the ethnic Chinese;

- To help promote and maintain harmony amongst the indigenous and Chinese communities through the provision of related information;

- To promote awareness and appreciation of the cultural heritage of the ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia amongst the region's indigenous and Chinese populations, and others through the preservation and conservation of related materials;

- To enhance the cultural heritage of Southeast Asian Chinese through comprehensive regional collections development programme; and

- To encourage, facilitate and provide access to collections concerning ethnic Chinese in the region, and to promote research on the collections relating to Southeast Asian Chinese.

The Concept of a Regional Information Centre

A regional centre to be located in Southeast Asia seems logical given the fact that of the estimated 25 million Chinese overseas, nearly 20 million are thought to reside in the region (Ch'ng, 1996). There has been a renewal in interest and research on the Chinese overseas, and many information seekers and researchers have lamented the dearth of materials and the absence of a research centre or library that would cater, if not exclusively, at least systematically and coherently to such needs (Ch'ng, 1996).

The concept of a regional information centre driven by the above mission, and the practical need for it, which was first mooted nearly four years ago in Beijing, is more than valid today in the light of the traumatic aftermath of the collapse of the so-called Asian economic miracle. Only less than two years after the Beijing proposal, while

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[2] Golden, being a 60-year cycle which signifies a special year for those born in the lunar year of the Dragon, one of the most important 12 Chinese zodiac signs. The Dragon is believed to bring prosperity and good luck.

[3] To be established at the Chinese Heritage Centre (CHC), Singapore.

[4] See Appendix 1 for the specific objectives. Ch'ng (1996).

one still expected the pattern of scapegoating[5] the ethnic Chinese minority in Indonesia during times of political, economic and/or social unrest to take place, no one anticipated the ferocity of the upheavals that followed in 1998.

The unabated, albeit sporadic, cross-border and bilateral tension between Malaysia and Singapore is underpinned largely by a mixed baggage of issues such as economics, politics and history, of which Leifer ascribes to "structural tensions" (Leifer, 1998). And although the Chinese minorities have been mostly integrated or assimilated into the mainstream of indigenous societies in the rest of Southeast Asia, especially in Thailand, Laos and Cambodia, many already acculturalized and not even speaking or writing Chinese but the language(s) of their countries of adoption, there is still a lurking potential for anti-Chinese sentiments and resentments to flare up or to be exploited; while less so in these countries, more so in other Southeast Asian communities where there are visible signs of ethnic Chinese enclaves and economic wealth.

External factors, as in the opening up and the rise of China, not only as a potential economic powerhouse but a political and military might, exacerbate the notion that ethnic Chinese communities in the region pose imagined threats (as fifth columns, especially against the backdrop of traditional social and economic *guanxi* ties) and other social integration difficulties.

These persistent misconceptions and misunderstandings of the ethnic Chinese amongst the indigenous communities in the region, and others[6], especially the notion that all Chinese are driven solely by their materialistic, selfish, and single-minded economic agenda, thereby causing resentment and even envy, require that more objective research be conducted to help dispel this myth. The establishment of a regional centre for information and research on the Chinese overseas communities in Southeast Asia, and elsewhere, will signify a visible recognition that there is a real need for more balanced examinations and investigations that would help ameliorate the misnomers, and highlight the positive contributions of the Chinese overseas in the arts, culture and the sciences, and their well-known philanthropy and charity not only for their own communities, but for non-sectarian causes especially in education in the countries of their adoption.

Certainly, research into the unrelenting negative indigenous perceptions, despite displays of commitment and loyalties to their adopted countries by many generations of the ethnic Chinese communities, would be helpful to both communities. Apart from helping to create a better understanding of the ethnic Chinese communities, results from objective research, their publication and dissemination could help influence

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[5] There have been many eye-witness accounts, media reports, and the findings of the special committee on the 13-15 May, 1998 riots (*Laporan eksekutif Tim Gabungan Pencari Fakta Peristiwa Tanggal 13-15 Mei: versi 2 TGPF, 1998*) that point to deliberate and systematic orchestration of the anti-Chinese riots. Recently, during the 1999 Malaysian general elections campaign, an opposition candidate alluded to official (like the police) machination behind the 13 May, 1969 anti-Chinese riots in Kuala Lumpur, – a view held by many. She is now charged with sedition, the penalty for which can be a prison term (*New Straits*, 15 January, 2000).

[6] See Hodder (1996), Naisbitt (1995), Seagrave (1995), and Weidenbaum/Hughes (1996).

government policy and decision-making to promote inter-ethnic relationships and integration. Moreover, as a permanent and structured entity it could provide not only balanced public relations information and materials to the media and hence the general public, but could act as an information crisis centre for receipt of information from troubled spots, and rapid dissemination of authoritative and authenticated information to assist in crisis management and to correct any negative notions that could aggravate the deteriorating situation. It could act as a referral centre, it could become the first and one-stop centre for independent and reliable information on the ethnic Chinese community in Southeast Asia.

Regional Centre in Singapore: An Awakening of Ethnic Chinese Mores

Prevailing events today, more so than ever, reify the compelling need for a bona fide regional research information centre to be established. The proposal for a Singapore-based regional centre has been justified by many reasons (Ch'ng, 1996). Singapore is strategically located; it has a larger Chinese population (75%). There is government empathy on the need for a greater understanding of the ethnic Chinese, and the sensitivities of the indigenous communities in the region.

Increasingly, in the face of globalization (and attendant "western decadence"), the government has exhorted the Chinese community to go back to roots, to revisit their cultural values as a cultural "ballast" to insulate against negative "western values" that may erode "Asian values", and to be reculturalized as "culturally" aware Chinese. It is also believed that it is through mother tongue language that this "culturalization" route can best be approached; hence the government's tenacious implementation of its Mandarin and Chinese language programmes targeting at the ethnic Chinese communities (especially the English-speaking). Chinese language (and Mandarin) is also seen as a valuable instrument in the context of the putative rise of China in the economic and political spheres. There is also a growing confidence in Singapore, especially now with the maturation of economic and social stability, to promote Chinese culture. And there is potential funding from the ethnic Chinese private sector, not only in Singapore but elsewhere in the region, than can be tapped and mobilized for this project.

Several developments have illustrated related government support and encouragement, and the revival of interest among the ethnic Chinese community in things Chinese. As early as 1987, the annual *River Hong Bao* festival, initiated by the Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations (SFCCA) has been celebrated with much fanfare to coincide with the 15-day lunar new year celebrations, "[showcasing] the best in Chinese talent" (*Straits Times,* 16 October, 1995*)*. The Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SCCCI) organized the first World Chinese Entrepreneurs Convention World in 1991, now held biennially, and the convention secretariat, located at the SCCCI) manages the *World Business Network*. In 1992, the Chinese Development Assistance Council was launched as a community self-help group catering to the Chinese poor.

The establishment of the Chinese Opera Institute (COI) in 1995, and the celebration of the 130th birthday of Dr Sun Yat Sen[7] and installing of the Sun Yat Sen (Wan Qing Yuan) villa in 1996 as a national monument are further manifestations of the growing confidence and interest of the government and the ethnic Chinese community in Chinese cultural traditions and mores.

In 1995, the Chinese Heritage Centre (CHC) was established on a private sector funding of US$3 million, with matching government grant, and a further US$18 million private sector pledge. And in 1998, the CHC published the first ever English *Encyclopedia on the Chinese Overseas*, edited by Lynn Pan (*Sons of the yellow emperor*), who was also the CHC's founding Director. Costing US$1.2 million to produce, its Chinese edition has been sold out, its U.S. edition (licenced to Harvard University) is almost sold out; and it is being translated into French. The Japanese edition is under negotiation. A permanent photo exhibition on Chinese overseas communities at the Centre, mainly of photographs used in the Encyclopedia, draws large crowds. The CHC, now under the new Director Professor Kee Pookong, is "finalising [a] plan for a *Journal of Chinese Overseas studies*, starting a CHC *Research monographs series*, and a *Directory of Chinese overseas researchers*"[8]. In the pipeline is a Chinese Genealogy and Chinese Overseas Studies Conference on 19 August 2000 with participants from Xiamen, Guangzhou, Hainan and Taipei[9].

The revamped Chinese Library Services of the National Library Board (NLB) is about to launch the *Chinese Virtual Community* Web site to "allow quick and direct access to Chinese resources from the [NLB's] regional and community libraries, exchange of ideas amongst users, [and] to promote local arts and Chinese heritage"[10]. It will comprise three main sections, viz., business and finance, student resources, and history and culture.

Unlike most national archives, the National Archives of Singapore (NAS) has a wider mandate beyond its traditional role of preserving and conserving official records. It solicits manuscripts, photographs, and slides from private and individual collections not only on Singapore but also on its neighbours. Its picture archives is available on the Web. In absorbing the Oral History Department in a reorganizing exercise, it continues to conduct interviews with prominent and lay personalities, many of whom are local ethnic Chinese.

In the light of these developments, it is not surprising that the proposal for Singapore to take assume this role seriously has had widespread appeal and interest[11]; however,

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[7] Dr Sun Yat Sen was a noted Chinese nationalist at the turn of the century. The main hall of the restored villa may be used as the venue for PRC-ROC negotiations as both sides see Dr Sun as a hero. (Kee Pookong/Ch'ng Kim See. *Private communication*. 20 March, 2000.)

[8] Kee/Ch'ng. *Ibid.*

[9] See the CHC Web site www.huayihome.org for announcements.

[10] NLB staff write-up, courtesy of Mrs Lim Kim Char, Deputy Director, NLB Chinese Library Services

[11] Attested by positive written and oral communications and correspondences between the writer and the then Minister of Information and the Arts, Brigadier George Yeo, Professor Tommy Koh, Board member of the Chinese Heritage Centre, Professor Wang Gungwu, Director, East Asian Institute, and others.

any interest in the specific recommendation that it be located at the non-government Chinese Heritage Centre (CHC) appeared to have been scuttled by the unexpected economic recession as a result of the devastating Asian currency crisis. One is, however, optimistic that the memory and the scars of the consequential financial disasters which have affected the private sector, especially the potential donors and supporters, will fade in time, for the CHC to be revisited as the regional location.

A Virtual Regional Centre from Singapore

Against this background, and the growing interest and need for the National Library Board (NLB)[12] to revive and revamp its Chinese Library services, in 1998, with the advice of the eminent Chinese scholar Professor Wang Gungwu, Director of the East Asian Institute, Singapore, an interagency committee, led by the NLB Chinese Library Services, was established whereby the concept paper (Ch'ng, 1996) was examined and adapted for implementation. The writer, representing the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, is a member of this Interagency Committee on Chinese Overseas Databank and Research Collections (COCOD). Other member institutions and libraries are the National University of Singapore (NUS) Chinese Library, NUS Chinese Studies Department, the Chinese Heritage Centre (CHC), the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) Library, the Federation of Chinese Clan Associations (FCCA), the National Archives of Singapore (NAC), the Singapore Press Holdings Resource Centres (English/Malay and Chinese), and the Singapore History Museum.

In considering the writer's concept proposal, the crux of the issue was the large capital outlay that was envisaged. As recounted by the COCOD Chairman, Mr Ng Yew Kang, at the launch of the web site *HuayiNet*,

> *In 1996, Miss Ch'ng Kim See, Head of ISEAS Library, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, advocated the setting up in Singapore of a regional resource centre for information and documentation on Southeast Asian Chinese studies. She presented this idea in a concept paper at the annual conference, held in Beijing, of the International Federation of Library Associations. Despite generating wide interest, the large sums of money (estimated by her at S$10 million) needed for the project deterred its implementation.*

> *In 1998, the National Library Board invited Ms Ch'ng to discuss and explore practical ways to give effect to her proposal. One possible approach identified then was to encourage the major institutions in Singapore to pool their resources by sharing information about their collections, aligning their collection policies to minimise duplication, and formulating an arrangement to facilitate co-operation and mutual sharing of information within their respective access policies. They were also to make their collections accessible to the public in and outside Singapore. This idea led to the formation of the Committee on Chinese Overseas Databank and Research Collections. Professor Wang Gungwu, Chairman of the Panel of Advisors to the Chinese*

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[12] Reconstituted in 1995 from the National Library

> *Library Services of the National Library Board, invited the ten* [sic][13]
> *institutions to sit on the committee* (Ng, 2000).

Strategic Directions

The COCOD has promulgated three phases of development in its implementation strategy, the first of which is targeted at local resources, the second at overseas resources, and the third to establish a comprehensive international network, and to undertake a massive digitization [and preservation][14] programme of valuable collections in phases two and three[15].

In Phase 1, the initial survey results arising from a questionnaire identifying local institutions and centres and collections have been collated and now available on *HuayiNet*. More work has still to be done, as it is believed that the respondents have interpreted Chinese overseas collections too narrowly, hence the lower than expected volumes estimated earlier on.

HuayiNet (www.huayinet.org) - A Virtual Reality?

Although no specific deadlines had been set or adhered to strictly, the plan to set up a network of local resources was brought forward in early deliberations which materialized into the development of the Web site *HuayiNet*, primarily to ride on the millennium hype and to coincide with the lunar new year celebrations of the year of the Golden Dragon. An auspicious day, the seventh day of the lunar new year, which the Chinese believe to be the birthday of humankind, along which animals have their birthdays as well, falling on 11 February 2000, was targeted.

With that decision, the COCOD members began to work in earnest, the logistics and leg work falling mostly on the NLB and CHC staff. This was indeed a bold move which had begun as late as November 1999, and when the funding situation was still unresolved. Indeed, a Web administrator and editor[16] was sourced even before responses to belated funding requests had been received. As it turned out, the optimistic "gamble" yielded a generous donation from the Lee Foundation (Yayasan Lee in Kuala Lumpur) for the initial phase of *HuayiNet*, with a further pledge to support its development over the next five years. The Web site development and contents were hurriedly done and put together in this initial phase.

HuayiNet, launched by Singapore Minister of Trade Brigadier George Yeo, as can be seen, is still in its embryonic stage, requiring a more in-depth and sustained development if it is to play its role of a virtual first and one-stop Web site as an information seeking and referral platform on the Chinese overseas, not only in the region but elsewhere. Owing to the short time frame to complete it in time for the

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[13] Nine institutions, the NUS having two on the Committee, the Chinese Library and the Chinese Department

[14] The writer's addition.

[15] See Appendix 2 for the COCOD's *Implementation strategy*.

[16] Fortunately, Ms Cheong Yun Wan, formerly an ISEAS editor, was able to offer her urgently needed services, motivated mainly by her volunteerism and civic-consciousness.

launch, the COCOD decided on a simple design, and to reside temporarily on the NTU server[17]. While its initial language is in English, and Chinese translations and original text are being implemented, its overall aim is to be multilingual, especially in the vernacular languages of the region, if the objective of reaching out to the indigenous and non-Chinese speaking[18] audience is to be realized.

There are now plans to contract out the Web administration to professional firms or individuals; and to appoint a Web content editor, to work under the guidance of the *HuayiNet* Editorial Committee[19], which apart from comprising a small number of members drawn from the COCOD, should have members appointed from within the local academic circles and other parts of the world to ensure that the intellectual content are of good quality, reliable, authenticated, varied, current, in-depth and comprehensive. Even with the best Web design, the absence of excellent content and up-to-date information would spell doom for *HuayiNet*. Indeed, the credibility of the COCOD may be endangered, especially with the funder and potential sponsors, not to mention the target audience; it would end up as a heap of cobweb.

COCOD Development Plans

Overlapping with the strategic plans in the first phase, the identification of overseas resources, to be compiled and merged with those of local resources into a directory for eventual mounting on *HuayiNet*, is in the pipeline for the second phase. Outside institutions and libraries are being identified to receive the survey form, and this conference provides a fortuitous opportunity to promote the exercise.

In addition to implementing the compilation of the directory of resources, developing *HuayiNet*, and the intention to digitize and preserve important collections, the COCOD has identified a number of core projects, some of which are promoting and facilitating access to collections through reciprocal interlibrary loans amongst local and international institutions; undertaking cooperative acquisitions through consortium[20] arrangements; identification of private collectors and collections and establishing contacts [to acquire or duplicate, and/or digitize and preserve them for wider access][21] ; and finally to establish a comprehensive network of online databases and research collections on Chinese overseas within and outside of the region.

No doubt, where possible, access to bibliographical records and catalogues, electronic text and databases will be made available on *HuayiNet*, playing the role of a virtual regional centre and an *e-clearinghouse*, limited though by copyright issues and other physical constraints by virtue of the hardcopy formats. The question then arises on its sustainability, especially when it is dependent on the goodwill and contributions of participating institutions and individuals, and very significantly on interested sponsors for their financial support.

[17] Courtesy of the NTU President Dr Cham, through the kindness of its Chief Librarian Mr Foo Kok Peow who sits on the COCOD.
[18] It should be noted that many Chinese overseas do not speak or write Chinese.
[19] Ng Yew Kang/Ch'ng Kim See. *Private communication*. 17 March, 2000
[20] The writer's addition.
[21] The writer's addition

It would seem more practical and dependable if the Web administration, and even most of its intellectual content, are to be managed by an institution, preferably the CHC, for reasons already delineated in the concept paper (Ch'ng, 1996). As it goes with every committee, especially one based on interagency cooperation[22], no matter how virtuous the intention is, or how enlightening the goals and objectives are, the development and sustaining of such a project as a Web site requires quick decision-making and implementation processes, which is nigh impossible where there is no clear-cut authoritative policies, guidelines, and lines of control, all of which are only possible within an institutional framework and structure. The CHC, it is noted, is developing its own "simple" Web site (www.huayihome.org) with student assistance, using the NTU server, so is this server temporarily housing *HuayiNet*, making it even a more logical development to collapse the two together.

The COCOD may wish to revisit this issue, to hand over *HuayiNet*, to the CHC to develop and maintain. After all, the role of the COCOD to establish the Web site has been accomplished. The COCOD can contribute to the Web site development through the hyper-linkages, and directly the contents, and in doing so, its members can concentrate on pursuing other objectives, developing, implementing and promoting other programmes and projects. The COCOD can still participate by assuming an advisory role on the management of the Web site, but leaving the executive management to the CHC, the endorsement of the Board of which would naturally need to be sought as there are financial implications in the long term.

The role of the COCOD can best be seen as a facilitating instrument, as an instigator, but not as a cohesive management entity, which, due to pragmatic reasons, belongs to formalized and structured organizations. Nevertheless, it appears that the COCOD may wish to experiment with another approach with the imminent appointments of a Web administrator and a Web editor, along with an international Editorial Committee. And to go further, perhaps each member institution could agree to undertake a specific programme or project as an institutional objective, with the necessary support from the COCOD, instead of the COCOD managing a project as a group, as has been the case in its early stages. The need for quick decision-making and contributions has not been satisfactorily fulfilled; sometimes, due to expediency, these habitually lend on a few shoulders, and that of the Chair. Delegating a specific project to an institutional member would spread the load and ensure a more constructive response and results.

Harnessing Resources and Facilitating Access

Singapore
Notwithstanding the absence of a regional centre as envisioned, even if the establishment of a regional centre materializes, real or virtual, the wealth and variety of information lodged in local libraries and institutions provides the backbone, complementing the information resource which may be collected and managed in the

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[22] The member representatives of which hail from the staff of the respective institutions, whose priorities (and loyalties) are understandably those of their employers.

regional centre. While there may be some duplication, by and large, most of the 13 separate collections reported in the survey of 1999 are unique titles, the overall estimates of books amount to over 44,600 titles in Chinese (51 per cent), English (46 per cent), a small number in Malay and other languages. There is a possibility that this number is under estimated because respondents may not have been exhaustive in their estimation.

By far, the NLB Chinese Library has the largest collection, followed by that in the NUS Chinese Library; while the primary, picture archives, microform and unpublished materials at the National Archives of Singapore (NAS), SPH libraries of newspaper clippings and full-text databases, and the ISEAS Library's private paper as well as picture archives, microform and unpublished collections, constitute not an insignificant amount. Clan association publications feature an important resource collected at the SFCCA, and the Singapore Chinese Chambers of Commerce and Industry (SCCCI) which has a good collection of business and industry publications, publishes a biennial directory of business and of its council members. The organizations in the survey also hold more than 550 titles of current periodicals, with some overlaps.

HuayiNet provides hyperlinks to the online catalogues of libraries and institutions which have mounted them on their respective Web sites. These would mostly comprise conventional print materials and microforms, but not the manuscripts and private papers. Even so, since the Chinese overseas collections may constitute only a small percentage of the whole library collection, it may be useful to provide "scoped" bibliographic records, targeting at the specific collection only, otherwise online searches may result in nil or "noisy" returns. As institutional policies may not encourage specialized "scoped" online bibliographic records on Chinese overseas studies on their own Web sites, it may be useful at a later stage for the COCOD to negotiate for such files to be periodically sent for HuayiNet inclusion, or the COCOD may consider assigning its members the task of sending regular updates of related records of materials belonging to their respective institutions, and to search the online catalogues of other institutions for such inclusions on a regular basis.

Regional and International Resources
In the next phase of the COCOD strategic plan, when regional and international resources are surveyed, it would be interesting and indeed valuable to identify and determine the research resources scattered all over. This worldwide mapping would for the first time open windows of opportunities for researchers and information seekers, hitherto losing much time searching for materials in disparate locations and countries, and of which they may even be unaware of their existence.

Accessibility
As with many hardcopy collections, unless duplicated in conventional secondary sources which are commercially available such as books and current periodicals, accessibility is a big challenge especially to primary and unpublished materials, which are in demand for original research. While digitization may resolve some of the problems, the question of copyright and deposition agreements are impediments,

rendering the need for having to use the materials at source, because even interlibrary loans cannot be invoked.

Prohibitive copyright costs of photographs used in the *Encyclopedia* (1998) have deterred the production of a CD-ROM version, and even commercially available CD-ROM and online databases are limited in their usage to licenced users. Nevertheless, if these materials are catalogued and their bibliographic records are available online through their respective Web sites, the intending user can plan a productive visit. Libraries and institutions therefore would need to be more thorough in their cataloguing by providing abstracts or annotations, as there is a tendency for many to give cursory citations only; and some just provide one bibliographic record for a set of microform title or a set of manuscript collection. But then again, staff shortages compel libraries to take short cuts.

Regional and International Networking

Assuming the established premise that networks and networking are imperative for the successful collaborative collection development of resources, and facilitating their availability and accessibility, whether expressed in person to person contact, through organized meetings or visits, and/or formalized institutional exchanges and ties, there are sufficient operating models in many domains and related activities to examine for adoption to promote and achieve related objectives in Chinese overseas studies and concomitant information provision.

This first international conference at Athens, provides a superb opportunity to plan and develop strategies, and explore channels and propose programmes and projects that would concretize this web of networks amongst information professionals, researchers, academics, information seekers, business, cultural and civic organizations, and institutions. Coherent and systematic collection development policies, as well as effective and pragmatic preservation and conservation programmes together with digitization efforts, will form the backbone of a concerted international link-up. Contacts with specialized cooperative groupings, such as the recently formed SEACAP (Southeast Asia Consortium on Preservation and Conservation) and the SARBICA (Southeast Asia Branch of the International Council of Archives) would be a good start.

Sharing based on consortium principles as well as facilitating mutual access, referrals and document delivery services would certainly be a hallmark of this world-wide effort. Even collaborating in fundraising, training, exchanges of staff and materials, as well as ideas, is an achievable objective. This international collaborative effort, if carefully planned and implemented, can serve as a model for emulation in global cooperative endeavours. The Singapore Interagency Committee on the Chinese Overseas Databank and Research Collections vies for the same goals and objectives in the context of regional and international cooperation, and would be an active participant. However, on a cautionary note, the targets and ambitions must be realistic and pragmatic, otherwise even the best thoughtful plans and agenda will only remain theoretical and academic.

Conclusion

While the ubiquitous information technology (IT), telecommunications and Internet developments have provided unparalleled opportunities to facilitate speedy information and document collection development and access, a virtual regional centre as "etherized" in a cyberspace framework as in Web sites, is not a satisfactory substitute for a bona fide regional information centre devoted to research into Chinese overseas studies. There are vast amounts and variety related materials, many of which are unconventional and grey literature, in multimedia and multilingual formats that should be physically made available and preserved and conserved as part of the cultural heritage of the Southeast Asian ethnic Chinese.

As part of the long-term objectives, research on these valuable collections that could uncover and reveal important and interesting aspects of the Chinese overseas and their multifaceted contributions to the development of the region that would help to dispel misconceptions, misperceptions, and myths, and to influence policy directions at societal integration, must be encouraged and should be a prime objective of this regional information centre. Nevertheless, it would be naïve indeed, to assume that such a centre could do more than just a small part to promote understanding of the Chinese overseas and their culture, and thus contribute to peaceful coexistence with indigenous and other communities, with whom acceptance and tolerance form a bulwark buffer to any potential provocation and sudden outbreaks of senseless violence targeted at the Chinese overseas communities.

Acknowledgements

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APPENDIX 1

Specific Objectives of the Regional Centre (Ch'ng (1996))

- Act as the regional focal point for information on Southeast Asian Chinese;

- Act as a regional clearinghouse for all ethnic Chinese materials and information;

- Provide a comprehensive reference and information service on Southeast Asian Chinese for walk-through visitors, through the telephone, facsimile, the Internet, by mail, etc;

- Actively promote the use of the reference, reading and research facilities of the Centre;

- Facilitate and support scholarly and educational research on Southeast Asian Chinese;

- Provide referral service to other library, documentation and information centres on Southeast Asian and other Chinese;

- Comprehensively, acquire and collect through purchase, gifts and exchange, all relevant current and retrospective information and research materials in any language and in any format[23] on Southeast Asian Chinese;

- Serve as a regional repository for all related materials and information generated by ethnic Chinese and other organizations and individuals;

- Develop and maintain a comprehensive database directory of ethnic Chinese organizations (and collections) worldwide of all levels and interests;

- Develop and maintain a comprehensive biography database of notable ethnic Chinese personalities in all fields of human endeavour;

- Develop, establish and maintain networks with other similar and related individual, national, regional and international centres[24] through the Internet or via conventional means to further the goals of the Centre;

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[23] i.e., books, journals, newspapers, articles, pamphlets, documents, manuscripts, private papers, conference papers, personal archives, charts, maps, microform, computer diskettes, CD-ROM, optical disks, databases, films, audiocassettes and tapes, videocassettes, etc.

[24] encompassing government, non-government (NGO) and private sector bodies.

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- Develop and maintain a calendar of events, conferences, meetings and activities of ethnic Chinese organizations and associations worldwide;

- Develop and maintain an annotated list of ongoing and completed research projects on ethnic Chinese;

- Develop and maintain a worldwide list of researchers on ethnic Chinese worldwide;

- Develop and maintain a database (index, abstract, and/or fulltext) of journal, newspaper, and composite works articles on ethnic Chinese;

- Develop and maintain an Internet Web site which will be the electronic dissemination platform of the Centre, to complement conventional communication means[25]; and

- Publish and disseminate on a regular and timely basis (monthly, quarterly, annually), new additions (especially private collections, manuscripts and are materials) to the collection, users and usage, plans and results of projects.

APPENDIX 2

Interagency Committee on the Chinese Overseas Databank and Research Collections

Implementation Strategy on Developing Chinese Databank and Research Collection

I   Phase One

Local resources (3 to 6 months)

i. Compilation of directory of resources in Singapore, i.e. online databases and location of physical collections.

ii. Cooperation between members' institutions, namely:
- Interlibrary loan procedures;
- Scheme of cooperative acquisition by country, format, language and etc.
- Explore feasibility of digitisation of local materials.

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[25] Through the Web site, the Centre's online catalogue and its other databases will be made available. The Web site will also point to other similar databases and facilitate direct switching to these databases and other related Web sites. It would also maintain important *mirror* Web sites and databases, and allow replication of its databases on other networked Web sites.

iii. Consider setting up a network of local resources.

iv. Progress report after six months.

II   Phase Two

Overseas resources (6 months to 1 year)

i. Compilation of directory of known overseas resources, e.g. S.E.A., Australia, Europe, Canada, USA, Holland and etc.

ii. Cooperative acquisition by country, format, language and etc.

iii. Identification of private collectors and establish contacts.

iv. Consider the possibility of digitisation of valuable collections.

v. Progress report after 1 year.

III   Phase Three

i. Establishment of a comprehensive network of online databases and research collection on overseas Chinese.

ii. Joint project of digitisation with institutions in China

iii. Digitisation of identified materials.

Progress report